

A Steep Trajectory: An Educational Autoethnography of a Working Class Late Bloomer

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Abstract

Using Bourdieu's theory of habitus and related constructs of capital, fields, and practice, I constructed an autoethnography that traced my early educational experiences as a First-generation student from a working class background. In light of persistent and substantial underrepresentation of Canadian working class students participating in and completing university, in this thesis I critically evaluate the trajectory that eventually led me to a master's degree in education and an ostensibly upper-middle class life. Autobiographical narratives told from my current position in "social limbo" (Friedman, 2015, p. 4), were interwoven alongside theory, empirical evidence, personal school-related documents, and interview data from my parents to explore the ways in which social class helped to shape my disposition of ambivalence towards the education system and experiences of upward social mobility. Findings challenged popular conceptions of meritocracy and education as "the great equalizer," and discourses that emphasize personal success and failure through their largely uncritical support for upward mobility. By providing a more complex analysis of social class and its intersections with gender, race, and important familial background characteristics, I present this autoethnography as a legitimate contribution to a small but growing body of Canadian literature concerned with the subjective experiences of working class students.

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Dedication

I imagine I no am different from most students who undertake the writing of a thesis when I say that more than the requisite amount of blood, sweat and tears has gone into its production. Through the process of completing what seemed, to me at least, to be the most unwieldy of tasks, I learned the following lesson: Of these three life-sustaining fluids, the loss of sweat and tears is of no great consequence after all. In the end, it's only the blood that matters.

This thesis is dedicated to students from working class families.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

“The heuristic trajectory has something of an initiatory journey about it...”

~ Bourdieu (2007, p. 62)

This is a critical, retrospective autoethnography of working class experiences of education, latent academic achievement, and a steep trajectory into a highly educated, middle class world that follows. Corbett (2014) writes: “Institutional education is unquestionably one of the key fields in which divergent populations of ability and disability, social position, inclination, and psychological difference are discovered, framed, and formed” (p. 5). For this reason, I focus on the role of education as the main site of social reproduction, and paradoxically, as the site of my own unanticipated social transformation - a transformation that I have found personally disorienting as it has involved a major shift in my social identity, and necessitated a radical change in self-perception. In this study, I aim to re-discover, re-frame, and re-form my understanding of “difference” as it has shaped my educational and social trajectories. My hope is that I will be able to reconcile some of the troubling discrepancies I now recognize between the place I come from and the people I love who raised me there, and the undeniably more privileged, though often contradictory, space of possibility among the upper-middle class, academic culture in which I find myself today. This is my attempt at reorientation.

Background (and) Story

I am not supposed to be here.

Life course research on the relationship between social class background, gender and education suggests that after my floundering high school career ended in 1987, I should have married, had children, and/or settled permanently into some type of low-skilled service sector work (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). Although I tried to meet

expectations, as per my habit, I failed in the follow-through. Instead, a dozen years after graduating from high school I veered off course, far from the well-worn path of manual labour cleared for me by my working class, immigrant parents and generations of my kin—a path that is still used by many young Canadians from working class backgrounds today, who, with minimal levels of education, take “traditional accelerated routes to adult life” via an early entry into the unskilled or semi-skilled work force and/or parenting (Brynnner, 2005, as cited in Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 140).

Not me, though. At the tender age of 30, without a map or a guide, I took the off-ramp to places unknown. No, not the hallowed halls or pristine campus of a top ranking Canadian university, but community college. Lacking the tools necessary for effective orienteering, once I started out on what turned out to be a much longer road to higher learning than anticipated, I got lost. Now, 15 years after leaving my “real” life behind, that is, my life before entering postsecondary education (PSE), I have finally found myself—sort of. I am in “social limbo” (Friedman, 2015, p. 4), ensconced within a highly educated, middle class set with my 6-year-old son and my partner, a tenured professor from a working class background who I met by chance at a classmate’s party while he was still a postdoc student.

Being inducted into my partner’s world made me aware of class nuances that also exist within academic culture. Reaching the peak of the educational trajectory - a doctoral degree, along with the qualifications and accumulated cultural capital it requires, and the heavy investment of time and money it demands - only to be rewarded with short-term and temporary teaching contracts as opposed to tenure stream employment, forces some academics to lead very precarious lives. My partner is therefore, one of the “lucky ones.”

As for me, I am still a work in progress. For now, I remain *en route*, taking my final steps to complete a master's degree in education with the hope that when I reach this milestone I will have a better understanding of where this path has been leading me and who I am in the process of becoming.

Educational Trajectories

Scholars in the field often refer to *educational trajectories* or “the sequence of positions within an educational field” students take as they transition from one level of schooling to the next—from primary to secondary to PSE and beyond, into adulthood (Doray, Picard, Trottier, & Groleau, 2009, p. 10). Students' individual trajectories are not determined within an educational vacuum, however, but are part of their given *familial* trajectory, which may be “ascendant or descendant,” depending on broader circumstances in the social field (Doray et al., 2009, p. 10). Nor are educational trajectories as consistent as the definition might imply. In a longitudinal quantitative study that examined the educational and career outcomes of 733 British Columbian high school students, “The class of '88” reported over 50 types of trajectories, including “timely,” “early,” and “terminal,” as well as some of my personal favourites: “diverse,” “delayed,” “prolonged,” and “circuitous” (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). In addition, a small minority of high school graduates remained “nonparticipants” in any type of PSE throughout the 15-year duration of the study. The likelihood of accessing and obtaining credentials at the highest points of the trajectory, the university level is, as Finnie (2011) argues, “the outcome of a detailed, complex, interrelated set of factors that begins to operate early in a young person's life and depends heavily on family background and early schooling experiences”

(as cited in Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology [SSCSAST], 2011, p. 14).

Occasionally, an individual's trajectory may break away from the familial trajectory, as mine did. Bourdieu (1984) explained that when this happens, a "broken trajectory effect" occurs; he describes broken trajectories as

the discrepancy between opportunities objectively available at any given moment and aspirations based on an earlier structure of objective opportunities. This discrepancy, *which is acute at certain moments and in certain social positions, generally reflects a failure to achieve the individual or collective occupational trajectory* which was inscribed as an objective potentiality in the former position and in the trajectory leading to it. (p.150; emphasis added)

According to Bourdieu (1984), when an individual's trajectory breaks away from that of the collective, "the agent's aspirations, flying on above [her] real trajectory like a projectile carried on by its own inertia, describe an ideal trajectory that is no less real" (p. 150). Contrary to Bourdieu's predictions, however, my aspirations are not "flying on above" somewhere, reaching for the stars, as it were. For some reason, they remain stubbornly grounded, as if weighed down by gravitational force.

I suspect the broken trajectory effect occurs more frequently in Canada today than it might have when Bourdieu wrote this about the French education system. Over the past four decades, Canadian policies towards inclusion have improved access to university for many young people who, historically, have had a marginal place in the higher education system due to structural barriers. For example, data collected from the 2011 National Household Survey (NHS) shows that today, "visible minority" Canadian-born, young

adults aged 20-24, tend to be more highly educated than their white contemporaries (Jackson, 2014). However, the most dramatic example of successful inclusion into the academy is, arguably, among women who now receive 61% of the undergraduate and first-professional degrees issued in Canada (Guppy & Luongo, 2015).

However, statistics can conceal as much as, or more, than they reveal. Andres and Adamuti-Trache (2008) conducted research demonstrating that educational trajectories continue to be shaped by structural forces despite many largely positive changes to the system. For example, gender continues to impact the educational and subsequent life course trajectories of women who are over-represented in the humanities and social sciences, while men continue to dominate in the STEM disciplines (i.e. science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) that lead to more lucrative and prestigious careers. This is true even for women who achieved higher math scores in high school than their male counterparts (Guppy & Luongo, 2015). Additionally, higher numbers of men participate in PhD programs than women (Guppy & Luongo, 2015). Thus, despite their comparatively low rate of participation in university, for the most part it is still White, middle class men who are most likely to earn the greatest and most immediate financial gains from their educational investments when compared with their female and other-race degree holding contemporaries (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [AUCC], 2011).

The use of statistics for highlighting the success of inclusion and diversity policies reinforces a predominant discourse of equal opportunity in Canada. This is problematic because uncritical acceptance of this discourse within mainstream society ignores the lived reality of individuals from these and other previously marginalized groups. In fact,

Guppy and Luongo (2015) confirm that “the struggles of marginalized communities have been erased or co-opted by homogenizing social forces that benefit the lives of the more powerful, particularly White, middle and upper class women and men” (p. 243).

Numerous studies in fact, confirm that *social class background*, above and beyond all other structural categories of difference, including race and gender, continues to be “the most stubborn and persistent factor affecting educational attainment in Canada”

(Lehmann, 2009, p. 632; see also Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008; Edgerton, 2010; Frenette, 2004; SSCSAST, 2011).

For this reason, I focus mainly on the structure of social class and more specifically, my own working class background, in the Canadian educational context. My aim for this study however, is to produce what Friedman (2015) describes as “a more holistic analysis of the lived experience” (p. 4) of class, which allows me to consider multiple aspects of my education (broadly speaking) to include both the formal and informal experiences that continue to influence my ideological development. To this end, I explore how my working class background intersects with my gender and race, as well as other important personal background characteristics, namely familial characteristics, English language learning and rural schooling.

Educational Trajectories of Working Class Students

There are many explanations young people may cite for choosing a delayed educational trajectory, terminating the trajectory they are on, or remaining as nonparticipants in higher education. However, reasons that students from working class backgrounds evoke often reveal what Sennett and Cobb (1972) famously described as “the hidden injuries of class” by expressing a sense of *personal* failure to achieve

academically, or an inability to fit in socially, in certain academic environments. For some, the perceived poor fit between themselves and the schools' culture becomes most salient at higher levels of the system. Interviews conducted by Lehmann (2007), for example, found that students' reasons for leaving university early typically centred on "class-cultural discontinuities" such as "not 'feeling university,' and not being able to relate to other students" (p. 89).

Consequently, some students drop out even when they have already proven themselves capable of turning out solid grades (Lehmann, 2007). Others experience the wide range of options available at university as overwhelming. Rather than risk making a (self-perceived) *wrong* choice, these students opt to delay the decision-making process indefinitely (Lehmann, 2004). Yet others, with only a high school level of education or less, do not even consider the possibility of PSE. Instead, they enter a low skilled and low paying workforce directly out of high school (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). This option is becoming increasingly difficult, however, as Canada continues to move from a largely manufacturing based economy into a post industrial, information age with an increasing reliance on knowledge sectors (Finnie & Mueller, 2007; Lehmann, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2009; SSCSAST, 2011). Thus, participation in PSE is less of a *choice* today, rather it has necessarily become a "central activity" in the lives of young adults (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 115).

In a talk held at my university in 2014, Dr. Lehmann explained that the education system acts as a microcosm of Canadian society, reflecting the predominant neoliberal ideology that emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of the ostensibly free individual, while greatly reducing the accountability of the government as seen, for example, in cuts

to public funding across many areas of social services and the subsequent rise of user fees. One of the results of neoliberalist ideology is that discourses of social class tend to be couched in individualistic and economic terms that minimize dimensions of structural inequality, especially as they relate to collective experiences of social justice and equity (W. Lehmann, personal communication, January 23, 2014).

According to Lawler (2000), discourse, as an institutionalized way of thinking and understanding and manifested through language, “cannot be separated from material practices or from the workings of societal institutions” (p. 22). Although it goes beyond the scope of this thesis to critique institutionalized discourse on social class, a critique is nonetheless integral to the study given its focus on the institution of education. As Lehmann (2014) previously noted, social class discourse is largely centered on economic terms and issues of redistributing funds. The problem with this, Lawler (2004) suggests, is that there is “little critical language in which to analyse and oppose such moves” (p. 110). In this thesis, then, I hope to tell a different kind of story, one that interrogates dominant discourses of social class and their influence on how class is taken up or, more accurately, largely ignored in the education system and in Canadian society in general. The following example helps to illustrate this point.

Lehmann (2014) reports that two groups of students present the greatest concerns for university deans across the country: those from First Nations backgrounds and those identified as “First Generation university students.” First Generation students are those who are the first in their family to attend PSE. Their parents have high school level education or less (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011). First Generation university students then, are the first in their immediate family to attend university. Their parents may have

non-university PSE credentials from a technical or trade school, or they may have had experience with community college. Regardless, the term “First Generation” sounds neutral, even politically correct, but Lehmann argues that it perpetuates misleading assumptions about equality and meritocracy by ignoring important aspects of disadvantage that characterize the lives of the vast majority of students who fall into this category—that is, that they are the most likely to come from poor and working class backgrounds where the economic and cultural capital necessary for educational success and attainment tend to be in short supply (W. Lehmann, personal communication, January 23, 2014).

Likewise, quantitative studies cited in this autoethnography point to parents’ highest level of education as the most important indicator of social class background. This indicator correlates middle class students with families in which at least one parent is university educated, and poor and working class students with families in which parents may have some non-university PSE experience, high school, or less than high school level education. When the effect of the familial educational history is accounted for, it becomes clear that educational trajectories cannot possibly unfold in the same way or arrive at the same end point across all social groups, as Turcotte (2011) reports:

In 1986, the probability of earning a university degree was about four times higher for people whose parents were university graduates than for those whose parents were not (45% versus 12%, a ratio of 3.8). In 2009, the ratio was smaller, with 56% of the children of university graduates holding a degree, compared with 23% for others (p. 39). ... Yet the disparities have certainly not vanished. Even

today, people whose parents are university graduates are much more likely to pursue a university education than other people. (p. 41)

In light of the discussion above, I have chosen Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, as “the anchor, the compass, and the course” (Wacquant, 2011, p. 81) to help me trace the educational trajectory that has led me from the affordable housing, underfunded schooling and unskilled labour force that has informed many of my personal assumptions and collective experiences of normal life, to my current position as an (ostensibly) upper-middle class, middle-aged, full-time graduate student in an historically affluent neighbourhood, near the university, where I live today.

Introduction to Theory

According to Bourdieu (1984), *habitus* is “necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions” (p. 170). It is experienced as “embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 56). As a “structured structure”—that is, a disposition that has been shaped by social structures such as class, race, and gender—and a “structuring structure,” meaning that individuals act upon the structures that inform their disposition, *habitus* provides us with our “sense of place” and possibility (Hillier & Rooksby, 2002).

In his later writings, Bourdieu (2007) described a more specific type of *habitus*, the “cleft *habitus*,” and this construct has been particularly helpful to my understanding of my own ambivalent relationship to the education system, and to the largely upper-middle class culture of people I supposedly belong with today, whose lives have *historically* been shaped by higher education. The cleft *habitus*, Bourdieu (2007)

explained, is a relatively durable disposition “inhabited by tensions and contradictions,” which may emerge from a “strong discrepancy between high academic consecration and low social origin” (p. 100). While my pursuit of a master’s degree in education at a mid-size comprehensive university may not be the first thing people think of as “high academic consecration,” in relation to the level of education obtained by many people from my social background and the community I have left behind, the discrepancy is “strong” indeed.

In addition, the cleft habitus is said to be “the product of a ‘conciliation of contraries,’” in other words, a balancing of forces that are supposedly opposed to one another (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 103). An example of this might be seen in my attempt to better understand and reconnect to the working class culture I come from through my participation in graduate school. For although my participation in higher education provides me with tools for a broader, academic understanding of my cultural background, it also distinguishes, and therefore distances me from it. Accordingly, this type of double bind produces “a habitus divided against itself” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 511), which inclines one to the ‘conciliation of contraries’” (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 103), as seen, for example, by my *need* to use this research opportunity to attempt some level of reconciliation between my personal/familial background and my current position and lifestyle as a university-educated, middle class woman.

As the construct of habitus is most productive when it is considered within a historical context, I have included a sketch of the familial background characteristics that helped shape my parents’ trajectories, which in turn, helped to shape mine, for as Finnie and Mueller (2007) state, “How these characteristics are developed and the mechanism(s)

by which they are transferred from parent to child is likely where future research, and resources, should be targeted” (p. i).

Family History: Conditions That Conditioned Me

To fully appreciate the characteristics my parents passed down to me, and which helped to shape my conflicted disposition towards education and social mobility I wanted to explore my family’s background by digging deeper into some of the conditions of their upbringing. According to my dad, when my grandparents were growing up, being educated up to the 6th grade was considered an accomplishment since poor and working class children were often pulled out of school before then to help support their families. This was the case for all four of my grandparents. When they had families of their own, seeing their children complete their compulsory education was an accomplishment they strove to meet. Higher education however, remained an extravagance for the wealthy.

Both of my grandfathers, my *opas*, were coalminers, so my parents were born, raised and educated in their respective “mining colonies” in the Netherlands (van der Cammen, de Klerk, Dekker, & Witsen, 2012). My mom describes hers as such: *“There were streets and streets, [of] all the same kinds of houses, and we had one of them. They were quite nice, and then later on we could buy them and change them, whatever we wanted to have changed.”*

I have had opportunities to visit my parents’ childhood homes and I remember them as being in attractive neighbourhoods made up of low-density, semidetached houses with large backyards. These houses were provided to miners and their families by the companies they worked for as compensation for “unhealthy and depressing working

environments” that came with long hours spent working underground, breathing in harmful coal dust and using dangerous explosives (van der Cammen et al., 2012).

My mom’s father worked underground from the time he was 14 years old, and he continued to work there for 36 years, until the mines shut down and the company had no further use for him. Thanks to his unionized job and the country’s wide social security net my mom’s family had could participate in many middle-class consumer practices, such as taking yearly vacations and keeping up with the latest fashions—although my *oma*, a former factory worker, sewed all their dresses herself to cut down on the cost of keeping my mom and her sister stylishly turned out. During her childhood, my mom lost one uncle in a mining explosion. She feels lucky to have kept her father, who only lost three fingers and most of his breathing capacity. When I pressed for more details about her side of the family she sounded apologetic, stating, *“I don’t know very much about my family. They went through a rough time and they just didn’t talk very much about it.”*

My dad’s father was forced to leave the mines early due to his more-rapidly deteriorating health. He became a city maintenance worker and raised ten children, together with his wife, on a greatly reduced income. Although both of my parents’ consider their families to be working class, my dad’s family suffered more economically and materially than my mom’s, and was probably a better fit for the category of “working poor.” In my dad’s family, there were no vacations away, or latest fashions to wear, but they too owned one of the sturdy brownstone company houses and kept a large vegetable garden, along with some small livestock, in the back yard to provide food for the family.

Both of my parents come from Catholic families; my mom’s only nominally so, but my dad’s family was devout, hence the difference in family size. I can still picture the

large crucifix hanging above my grandparents' bed, a reminder no doubt, to stay focused on the higher purpose of the marital act. I also remember my oma asking this rhetorical question, on more than one occasion: "*Do you think I wanted 10 children?*" to which she would hastily add, "*Of course, I wouldn't want to be without a single one of them now!*"

His- and Her- Stories

My parents, Jacques and Ria, were educated as per the cultural standards of the time and place in which they grew up - the early post war years in the Netherlands. That means that their educational and subsequent occupational trajectories were largely predetermined by their social class background, gender and religious affiliation. At that time, societal norms were such that isolation from peers and physical punishment were acceptable forms of discipline, both at home and at school. The following passages from my parents' interview transcripts speak to the normalcy of these practices:

Jacques: *[The teachers] would hit, not as mean as my dad did, but they would hit. And there was nothing to it. You wouldn't go to the headmaster you know, to get the strap. Right there in the class, Boom! You got one, and I didn't think it was all that wrong. But um, if I would come home and would tell that, well! The teacher never gave you enough man! Double that up!*

Ria: *The schools I went to were only Catholic schools and I had only nuns as teachers. Yeah, and most of them were pretty good but there was one that scared the heck out of me (laughing softly) and she was really a mean, mean person, yeah. ... She used to pull my ear until it was all infected. And she did that every time. ... I was just so afraid of this nun because of the things she did to the kids in the class.*

Sandra: *Did she do it to all the kids?*

Ria: *Well, the kids that um, the kids that weren't paying lots of attention, you know? And kids like me, who were afraid of her. She knew how to use her power I think, if that's what you want to call it.*

Later, she added: *I got punished often enough when I got to junior high. I spent more time in the attic than in the classroom.*

These were the conditions in which my mom completed a terminal program at a Catholic *Huishoudschool*, or housekeeping school. There, in addition to receiving the basic curriculum considered adequate for poor and working class girls, my mom learned how to cook, bake, clean, and take care of children—all the skills she would need for the type of occupation she was expected to have. Although some of my mom's teachers, as well as her own parents, tried to encourage her to take a slightly longer terminal program offered to working class girls, a program that would have provided her with skills to do basic office work, my mom internalized her school experiences in the form of the following belief: *"I am not a good learner."*

Today, the abuse my mom and many of her classmates endured can be located within a larger context of systemic abuse by Catholic clergy in institutions across the Netherlands, Canada (most notably in residential schools), and in many other parts of the world. While she recognizes that her exploitation had very little, if anything, to do with her per se, she insists that her decision to leave school earlier than necessary was based on personal character flaws (i.e., *her obstinacy*), stating, *"I guess I was stubborn at that time and I just said no, I don't want to do it... I could have gone on to a higher school but I just didn't want to do it. All I wanted was to finish the schooling that I needed to finish and get a job and try and make money, you know? That was all I wanted."*

My mom completed her program at the Huishoudschool and immediately entered the workforce as a housecleaner and child-minder for a wealthy family, where she recalls, *“The lady of the house, she was not a very nice person and she expected a little bit too much from a 14-year-old. I really, really had to work my ass off in that place.”* Nevertheless, my mom has made the most out of her education, earning an income not only as a house cleaner and child care provider, but also as a factory worker, caterer, custodian at a bank, and as a cook in various venues: in a cafeteria in an industrial plant site, at public golf courses, and in a construction camp in northern Alberta. After recalling all the different kinds of jobs she has worked over her lifetime, she wryly remarked *“I’ve had some glamorous jobs, I’m telling you!”* My mom finished her last (paid) house cleaning gig shortly before she turned 70.

My dad’s educational trajectory was somewhat less straight-forward due to a slight detour he was encouraged to take, into the academic stream. He explained: *“You see, when you went, let us say then, to something like high school, there was money involved. You had to buy your own books. There was um, I’m not 100% sure, Dad was the one who did this, let us say, but there was a cost to it. That part I know because it was decided, you know, I should actually go further. [My teachers] thought I was pretty good.”*

He explained that entry into “gymnasium,” the Dutch equivalent of university, where the study of languages is an important focus, was expensive, and therefore mainly accessible to the upper class—and to priests, because the Catholic Church would pay their way. A commitment to the priesthood was a route into higher education for the “gifted” poor and working class male students like my dad:

Jacques: *So some people, if they didn't have the money, if you could get him in, let us say, in the seminar [sic], in the priesthood, and then before you have to make the vows, they had the gymnasium in their pocket. And, you know, that was a good step for where ever you wanted to go after that... I was supposed to be the priest in the family, believe it or not, the oldest boy. There was a push for that too, a little bit.*

The “push” stopped when my dad was caught indulging in the blood of Christ with another alter boy in the church basement. Instead of entry into gymnasium, he was streamed into *Hogreburgersschool* (Higher Folk Studies, as per his translation), which also provided access to university, but limited access, to programs of a more practical nature, such as agricultural studies or engineering, for example. Unfortunately, here too, he “*flunked*” out after completing only 2 years of his program, though not due to a lack of ability, but a lack of appreciation for an opportunity that he claimed provided “*Too much freedom—for me anyway.*” By age 13, my dad, along with his cousin and another friend from the neighbourhood began skipping school to experiment with their new-found freedom, stating, “*It didn't take long you know, then we had all kinds of nonsense in our heads, and that was actually the first time that I started to go to bars already.*” His eventual expulsion from the program marked the last time he recalls getting “*prügel*” (a German word for “beating”) from his father.

My dad ended up completing his studies at the trade school from which the rest of his peers had already graduated. Although his experience in the academic stream was brief, he believes that even this short amount of time was beneficial to his intellectual development. It provided him with an enriched educational experience that he claims put

him “*head and shoulders above everyone*” at trade school because in the academic stream he had been taught to think beyond the practical, and to reason theoretically.

Jacques: *I was great there, especially in um, theoretical deals, heh? The instructors, they were actually miners who, let us say, had injuries and stuff like that. So that was another job for them, and they were very good at, at their job, what they knew. But, let us say, if they had to explain how... let us say, how much a pump can put out—so there is [sic] some mathematical deals involved—I could show them up. I was not very popular with the instructors, but I was very popular in class. But that was again, that little bit [of education] I had more than most of them, and I certainly had more than the instructors had. I mean, you could blindfold them. They could take that pump apart and put it together, but if they had to really explain, let us say, why that thing had such a capacity and could do that, I was better than them. Not that I been that good; I just had those two extra years of higher education, that little bit more. So when I finished there, cum laude, I went to my first job. It was the coalmine anyway.*

After two years of working underground, against his parent’s wishes, my dad was conscripted into the Dutch army. To escape the “*hated*” military police position to which he had been assigned, he requested to be stationed in Suriname. He describes his 2 years abroad simply as being “*tremendous*.” It would become one of the most formative experiences of his life, opening a sense of possibility and a taste for freedom that facilitated my parent’s immigration to Canada a few years later. Occupationally however, possibilities did not open to him. My dad lacked the English language skills he would have learned in his academic program. Within 2 days of their arrival in Canada, he

accepted a job as an auto body repair man—the line of work he had taken up in the Netherlands after returning home from Suriname.

Jacques: *When I came out here I wanted to change jobs. I had had it, when I came to Canada. But when I got then here [sic], let us say - well, at least in body work they didn't have to tell me nothing. I knew, heh? Just set me the car there and you can point, heh? Whatever. It was easy. Body work was all my life. But it was stupid you know, in a way, heh? You know, I was never cut out for body work [laughing]. Well, I mean I am not the worst body man that was ever made, but when I look to some people; they can do with a rock more than I can do with a hammer and a plier, man!*

My dad worked at a garage during the day and went to school at night, earning his high school diploma in Canada. With understandable pride, he tells me that from getting his first job in Canada up until his retirement at the age of 70, *“I have never been a day without work.”* He continues to do auto body work on occasion, although at 75 years of age, he now works “under the table.” More often though, my dad spends his time as a volunteer at a nearby minimum security prison where he co-facilitates a program for inmates, sponsored by the Catholic Church, and ironically named *Free to be Me*.

My parents also help with the upkeep of a historic French Catholic church located next to the old rectory-turned-family dwelling which they have been renting from the local diocese, exchanging their casual labour for low rent that has never been increased in the 25-plus years they have lived there. Recently, a new young priest has been dropping hints that he would like to live in the house himself. My parents only mentioned it to me in passing; they refuse to dwell on the eventuality that one day they will have to leave

their home and live somewhere beyond their limited financial means. They progress through old age with few complaints, while I worry about their future all the time.

A Curriculum Vitae for Self-Analysis

My path to and through graduate school has often felt like I have been running a long and circuitous obstacle course. Some of my hurdles, I see now, have been self-imposed (like not seeking help from my teachers and professors when I have desperately needed it); while others have seemed like invisible barriers I discover only after running into them (such as hitting the “class ceiling” (Brine & Waller, 2004) in a job where, among a university educated workforce, I was the only college graduate with the required credentials for our shared position, and yet, was still the lowest paid staff member). For some reason, I keep circling back here, back to the field of education.

During an orientation luncheon for incoming Master of Education (MEd) students, I was asked the following “icebreaker” question by one of the faculty: “Why did you apply to the ‘Social and Cultural Contexts’ stream of this program?” Having no specific goal in mind for the credentials I eventually hoped to earn, I presented a synopsis of my life’s history, hoping I think, to be reassured that my experiences as a mature student, a former educational assistant at a residential treatment centre for “at risk” youth, and a Bachelor of Education-Turned-Psychology major somehow qualified me as a suitable candidate for this program. Instead, it elicited this somewhat less-than-reassuring response: “What an interesting trajectory!” Unbeknownst to my future professor, her remark stuck with me and provided the motivation for this study, as well as for the more personal work of gaining insight into a part of my life I could never explain to any degree of satisfaction, least of all to myself...

I was born in a predominantly French-speaking, though ethnically diverse working class neighbourhood in the Vanier district of Ottawa, one year after my parents arrived in Canada. Like many of its residents, my first language is not English, but it was not French either. My mother tongue is called *Plat*, a Dutch dialect used in the coal mining regions of southern Limburg, where my parents are from. I have no *real* memories of my earliest years in Ottawa; only a few I have self-constructed from old family photographs, personal artifacts and stories my parents have told countless times. Like the one about a plain, miniature 14 karat gold band I have had since birth— “a gift for the baby,” my mom has often recalled, presented to me by an old Jewish bachelor who lived in the apartment directly upstairs from ours, and with whom she practiced her “good morning” greeting in hesitating English each day when she picked up the mail from the lobby.

My family moved west just before my third birthday, eventually stopping in Edmonton, Alberta. This move, like most big events in my life, took very little planning or preparation, as my mom explains: “*When we came from Ontario, we didn’t have a job, we didn’t have a place. We just sold everything and packed up and went like a pair of gypsies.*” My dad concurs: “*We sold and gave away the shit what we had and we moved... We had a big tent, we had Petey the canary, and you [laughing], and a Buick!*”

Moving was always relatively easy since my parents have never owned a house. I once asked my dad why, since all our friends live in houses that they (or the bank) owned. It seemed, to me at least, that homeownership was just a normal part of the “Canadian way.” My dad stated, very frankly, that he has never wanted anything that anyone could take away from him. My mom tells it differently though. She claims that

they had considered buying a house when I was young, but that it seemed too risky because it would have meant that we could not afford other things my family enjoys. For example, in the summertime, as part of their custom growing up and living in the Netherlands, my dad would close his shop for a couple of weeks for a family vacation. As far back as I can remember, while I was growing up I spent parts of every summer exploring the Rocky Mountains, visiting friends on Vancouver Island, camping and fishing at Meadow Lake in northern Saskatchewan, or closer to home, at the Saddle Lake Cree Nation reserve where my dad was friends with a council Chief. Once every 5 or 6 years we would fly to the Netherlands to visit extended family “back home.” Travel, whether abroad or to other parts of Canada, was highly valued by my parents, and my mom believes these experiences would not have been possible if they had had taken on the financial burdens of homeownership.

So, from basement suites and above-ground apartments, to the “townhouse” (as my mom refers to it) in a subsidized housing project, to a small bungalow, and a slightly run-down, turn-of-the-century, clapboard farmhouse that we inhabited for 8 years during my childhood and adolescence, we continued to move to less-densely populated and increasingly remote areas of the province until my last year of high school, when we returned to the subsidized town house where we had lived when I was a preschooler. All my primary and most of my secondary education, save my last two years of high school, took place at two neighboring rural schools. The nearest urban centre (a semi-rural, industrial city with a population of 12, 500 people) was approximately 35 kilometers away from where I spent eight of my formative childhood and adolescent years. The big city, Edmonton, with its university and colleges, was approximately 70 kilometers away.

At my rural schools, I experienced the full spectrum of academic highs and lows. At my first school, I had been an “A” student. However, after moving to a completely rural setting in the 4th grade, I became more of an “average” student, earning mostly B’s and some C’s throughout the remainder of elementary school. Then, in Grade 7, I passed with honours, thanks to the competitive influence of my peer group at the time, which consisted of a professor’s daughter, the daughter of two government administrators and the daughter of a single mother who lived in a single-wide trailer out in the country. By the end of junior high school, I was no longer hanging out with this crowd. We drifted apart “naturally,” without any intent or malice – me and my trailer dwelling friend having separated from the other two. Over the next few years, a myriad of economic, familial, and personal difficulties combined, and by tenth grade I was skipping more classes than I attended and when I bothered to show up at all, I often did so “under the influence.” No one paid attention to my behaviour or my failing grades. Rural life, which had seemed so fun and exciting as a child had become a source of boredom, constraint, and isolation from my peers once I reached adolescence. As an adolescent, I dreamed of living in a city that was so expansive, so densely populated it never slept, and no one knew or cared about anyone else’s business. Tokyo, I imagined, would be ideal. Instead, here I was, stuck attending a small, under resourced rural school, the kind of school that new, young, energetic teachers parachute into infrequently and only briefly, just long enough to gain “experience” to use somewhere better.

Unfortunately, though perhaps not surprisingly, many of the conditions I have described are not conducive to creating an environment where higher education is discussed, planned for, or necessarily even encouraged. Finnie et al. (2011) list eight

groups that policy-makers have concerns with regarding their ability to access PSE. Of these eight, I fell squarely into the first four. I think I missed out on membership to the fifth category on a technicality, but I leave this for the reader to judge. Moreover, Finnie et al. (2011) found that “being a first-generation PSE student is larger than the effects for any of the other under-represented groups” (p. 22), so I guess my relationship to any additional groups was just a bonus anyway. These are the eight groups of concern:

1. Those from low-income families;
2. Those from families with no history of attending PSE (i.e., “first-generation” students);
3. Those living in rural and isolated areas that are far from PSE institutions;
4. First-and second-generation immigrants;
5. Those whose mother tongue is French;
6. Single-parent (or other “non-traditional”) families;
7. Aboriginal or First Nations ancestry; and
8. Those with disabilities. (p. 3)

When I was in my mid-teens, our family gained a temporary new member. “James” was one year older than me and the nephew of a close family friend, a Metis bachelor who made his living as a truck driver despite claims to being illiterate. James came to live with us from a reserve where he was, apparently, in trouble - not only with his teachers, but with a gang, law enforcement and with his stepmother who had kicked him out of the family home. He only had one year of high school to complete before graduation. Maybe it was because of his own truncated schooling that James’ uncle was

so invested in his nephew's educational future, but he was certainly concerned that James wouldn't finish high school if he stayed on the "rez".

When James arrived at our house with a mostly empty garbage bag containing his worldly possessions, he was sullen and withdrawn. Despite, or more likely, because of this trait, James and I managed to hit it off, quite literally, often fighting brutally with one another as only siblings can, with my younger brother taking the side of whoever seemed to have the upper hand. Within a week of moving in, James had stolen my "Cult" cassette tape, and I had thrown a half wheel of gouda at his head. He mocked me mercilessly when I had my hair cut a short punkish coif, but threatened to beat the living daylights out of anyone else who did the same. He roared with laughter when I sprained my elbow trying to bail from my brother's moped—a beat up, second hand bike that was his pride and joy until I crashed it into a barbed wire fence. I, meanwhile, openly expressed my resentment of his unearned male privilege. I had believed my dad favoured James because he always allowed him to take the family car to visit friends in town, and he even gave James money for these excursions. My younger brother and I would never have dared to ask our parents for money, nor did we ever receive any. But no matter how much James and I insulted or injured one another, every night after supper, at my mom's command, we found ourselves standing together at the kitchen sink, washing dishes in surly solidarity.

James and I were similar in that we both needed to leave our familiar environments where we had each developed several bad habits, so that we could move forward with our lives. While we both managed to graduate from high school on time - James, from my old rural school where apparently, no one would mess with him, and

me, from an urban, Catholic high school where I was introduced to a whole new social group of White, urban, middle class kids, and a new expression as well: “White trash” - we differed greatly in our outcomes. I would spend the next 13 years adrift in the uncertainty of what to do next with my life, numerous dead-end jobs keeping me afloat until then. James however, sank like a stone in murky water—out of sight, but never completely out of my mind. The last I heard, James had moved somewhere up north, where trouble had found him again.

As an aside, I want to emphasize that the educational experiences I write about in this thesis are *mine*. I do not presume to be able to speak for James or any other people I have known from First Nations, Metis, or Inuit backgrounds (who, from this point, I will refer to by the more general term “Aboriginal”). However, as they had been present during my formative years, and in my work as a teaching assistant at a residential treatment centre, embedded within some of my narratives is an implicit comparison and critique of educational experiences in predominantly White, European educational environments, by Aboriginal students.

After graduation, I worked in a variety of poorly paid service sector jobs and enrolled in some inexpensive, non-credit Continuing Education courses while I tried to save money for PSE. My first experience of PSE, as I mentioned in my introduction, was at a large community college where I enrolled in 10-month Teacher’s Assistant certificate program at the age of 30. Almost immediately after graduating from college, I was hired to work as an educational assistant for “at-risk” youth at a rural, residential treatment center where most the student population self-identified as Aboriginal, First Nations or Metis. Here, I believed I had finally found my way into legitimate adulthood via a

respectable and rewarding career that I had naively hoped to serve for the rest of my working days. Clearly, I had not yet heard about “credentialism.”

Owing to these varied formal and informal educational experiences, when I entered a university transfer program in my mid-30’s, I was theoretically underprepared but I had a cache of “practical knowledge” acquired through life experience (Bourdieu, 1991). My singular goal when I started a bachelor of education program was to have that knowledge legitimized with credentials. All these years and a bachelor’s degree later (not in education, which I abandoned when I moved here, but in psychology), I am still underprepared. Although I hope to earn the credentials that legitimize my efforts in graduate school, today I am more concerned with trying to make sense of the social and educational disparities I have been witness to and affected by. My wish is that this study will help others gain insight into their own lives or the lives of working class students they work with.

Thus, it is against a backdrop of seemingly dichotomous identities (i.e., White privilege vs. White trash); paradoxical desires (i.e., a longing to reclaim my working class roots while distancing myself from them through higher levels of education); and chance encounters with the “right” people (among them, a former postdoc-turned-tenured-academic who is my life partner) that makes mine a unique position from which to critically analyze my educational experiences and subsequent upward social trajectory. Moreover, I feel compelled by my experience to interrogate the role that education plays in helping to shape the kind of *habitus* that may unwittingly reinforce and/or reproduce the conditions from which social inequality persists.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is twofold: My initial aim was towards self-understanding through gaining insight into the formal and informal educational experiences and personal decision-making processes that helped shape my trajectory and an ambivalent disposition towards upward social mobility. In line with this goal, I designed the study to answer a basic existential question: How did I get here? Through my inquiry, the following sub-questions emerged:

1. What were some of the unique familial characteristics and early educational experiences from which my primary habitus emerged?
2. How has my habitus adapted as I entered various educational, occupational and social fields?
3. What is the source of my ambivalent relationship to education and upward social mobility?
4. Who am I in the process of *becoming* as I extend my educational trajectory into midlife?

Early into the research process however, I became discouraged with the academic discourse about the “problem” of working class students and education, which seemed oversimplified in its focus on individual/familial deficits, and on economic factors and their redistribution as easy solutions. What I was searching for, but could not readily find, was the “critical language,” Lawler (2004) describes, with which to discuss, analyze and explain to others, how working class life is experienced. Thus, a second goal for this study emerged, which is simply to initiate a more complex discussion and analysis about how class is lived and felt by students who come from working class backgrounds.

To this end, I present this autoethnography as a legitimate contribution to a small but growing research community that *is* concerned with the subjective experiences of working class students. In doing so, I am attempting to build a case as to why concerned educators, at all levels of the system, might want to consider challenging current neoliberal discourses of individualism, meritocracy, and an uncritical acceptance of upward mobility that persists in educational discourse, particularly if they want to dismantle classist hierarchies that “unwittingly alienate the very students they hope to inspire” (Jones & Vagel, 2013, p. 129).

CHAPTER TWO: A (NON) REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

When I started this project, I found many of my perceptions and experiences of school reflected in research findings, even in the most recent of empirical studies of working class students and education. I discovered, for example, that I was not alone in feeling like a “fish out of water” most of the time I was in school (Lehmann, 2012, p. 542; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009, p. 1104), or a “cultural outsider” once I immersed myself fully into the culture of academia after following my partner across the country for his academic position (Lehmann, 2012, p. 530). In many of these studies, students from working class backgrounds expressed a kind of pre-reflexive sense of “difference” from the mainstream, and often, ambivalence about their place in higher education. Like me, most did not or could not identify any structural reasons for their experience. Through my reading I could finally see that I have never been alone in my experiences of difference, though it now seems a bit strange to admit the depth of my relief over this revelation.

After my initial rush of validation was over, I was left with the dismal realization that during a span of four decades so little has changed in terms of the challenges students from working class backgrounds face and how they continue to experience the *process* of education. As I read interviews from these students I could not help but self-reflect and feel moved by their words. As I read the discussions and conclusions to these studies, I wanted to “talk back” to the literature—at times to agree, other times to contradict, or sometimes to simply extend the researcher’s insights or answer their questions, based on my own experiences.

My relationship to the literature I used in this study follows Norris and Sawyer's (2012) assertion that in *duoethnography* (another method of ethnographic inquiry) the literature "is regarded as another partner in the conversation and provides additional perspectives beyond those of the [researcher]" (p. 34). Thus, I take my instinctive dialectic engagement with the literature as evidence that their assertion holds true for autoethnography as well. Like all other qualitative methods, autoethnography places a high priority on the literature. However, I agree with Norris and Sawyer (2012) who warn against creating a survey of the literature, as "the quest for foundational or 'seminal' pieces could be considered a form of patriarchy, through which the dominant male asserts his power over his offspring/readers" (p. 34).

Institutional requirements to present a literature review in its historical placement, near the beginning of the document, to signify its importance, is another way to assert power over both the researcher and the reader. Not only does the literature review provide readers with the "facts" in the form of a persuasive academic discourse, this discourse inevitably influences the way the researcher tells her story. In this way, the literature review may compromise the credibility of autoethnography, a method of inquiry designed to give priority to the researcher/participant voice.

Certainly, one of the most affirming aspects of conducting this research was how the literature seemed to find me. As I engaged with certain readings, my inquiry led me towards other relevant academic sources that similarly confirmed, contradicted and/or enhanced the "practical knowledge" I initially brought with me into the study. In this way, the literature gave an intellectual shape to my work from the ground up, so to speak, based on my expanding need for deeper understanding. More importantly, it enriched the

discussion rather than dictating what I, as a researcher, felt “allowed” to discuss, and how to discuss it. In this way, the process of conducting an autoethnography reinforced my valuation of academic literature, while teaching me to be critical of the kinds of discourse it helps to produce. But while my engagement with the literature has validated some of my strongest intuitions, it has also taught me the importance of re-evaluating my own old assumptions in the face of conflicting evidence.

On a final note, and as a caveat to the reader, this is not a traditional literature review in the sense that I provide a survey of the existing research on each of the background characteristics I explore in this thesis: gender, race, rural education, English language learning and family/parental influences. Instead, these pieces are interwoven throughout and alongside the text in their rightful place as an equally important and relevant partner in dialogue with me and with you, the reader, whom I invite to join in the conversation by recalling, reaffirming and calling into question some of your own educational stories in light of what I present to you here (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). The remainder of this chapter includes a general discussion about social class to set the context for the narratives and analyses in Chapter Four, as well as providing a more detailed explanation of the theory of habitus.

Who are the “Working Class”?

As someone who is still grappling with what it means to come from a working class background, it seemed imperative that I provide a definition of the term before moving on to further discussion about working class students. However, this proved to be more difficult than anticipated, as I discovered that there is no universally accepted definition or even clear demarcations between social class categories in Canada. Our

notions of class are so ambiguous that defining it largely depends on who you ask. This is not only true in Canada; all over the western (i.e., neoliberal) world it would appear, as Skeggs (2004) suggests, that “we are in a period when class is denied as an issue on a regular basis” (p. 75). In America, for example, class has long been considered an “uncool subject” (hooks, 2000, p. vii); in the U.K. class is “the difference that dare not speak its name” (Reay, 2006, p. 303); while here in Canada, class lives on as “the elephant in so many rooms” (Micallef, 2014, p.13).

The ideology of a classless society, or perhaps more accurately, the collective belief that we are all part of one big middle class, is prevalent in Canada and it is expressed through current political discourse in which all working families appear to be synonymous with the middle class. As a case in point, Lehmann (2009) notes that Canadian perceptions of what it means to be “normal” or “ordinary” are associated with “amorphous middle class values” (p. 642). His research shows that when pressed, very few working class students associate with a cultural notion of the “working class,” but rather, they see themselves as part of a nebulous middle class. However, as Skeggs (2004) warns, the refusal to acknowledge the existence of a classed society allows assumptions that individuals have equal access to the cultural resources necessary for developing a sense of belonging, whether in school or in the broader social world, to proliferate.

Defining “Social Class”

A basic definition of social class from *Introductory Sociology—1st Canadian Edition* provides an example of the over-simplified way in which class is taken up in institutions of higher education. It states that social class is “a grouping based on similar

social factors like wealth, income, education, and occupation” (Little, 2014, p. 273).

Accordingly, these factors help determine the level of power and prestige an individual or group of individuals has in a society, so that those with more money tend to have more power and greater opportunities. I would argue however, that the relationship between an individual’s social class background and their educational and life trajectories is more complex than this definition suggests, and is intertwined with more than one’s present financial and material circumstances.

For Bourdieu (1984), whose class-focused theory of habitus I used in my study, social class emerges from a shared *history* of economic security and opportunity (or a lack thereof) that underpins social positioning and generates a particular type of disposition and practices that go along with it. Class therefore includes subjective and embodied aspects of daily experience felt by individuals and groups who share a similar history and neighbouring positions in social space. Understood in this way, class is much more than material worth, occupation, educational or economic status; it is “something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being” (Kuhn, 1998, as cited in Reay, 2005, p. 924).

Defining “Working Class”

Sociologists Macionis and Gerber (2008) describe four distinct social classes in Canada: Upper class, middle class, working class and lower class, with only the “upper” and “middle” classes containing factions within each. Their definition of the working class states: “This class comprises about one-third of the population and has lower incomes than the middle-class and virtually no accumulated wealth. ... Their jobs provide less personal satisfaction, requiring discipline but rarely imagination, and subject workers

to continual supervision (2008, p. 278). However, by neglecting to include important interclass differences that exist within and faction this group, their description is limited in what it can tell us about the nuances of working class reality.

Taking a Marxist approach, Camfield (2014) argues that the working class entails *all* those who, regardless of earnings and job status, produce wealth “in the form of commodities worth far more than [they] receive back in wages and benefits” (para. 9). Accordingly, social class relates to one’s ability to own and/or control the means of production of goods and services, with the “dominant class” comprised of those who have the highest levels of ownership and control over their working conditions, while the “working class” are those who produce goods and services but have little autonomy over their work conditions. Camfield (2014) observes that other forms of oppression such as sexism, racism, heterosexism, colonialism, etc., as well as differences in pay, workplace status and authority intersect with low social positioning to create interclass differences and lines of division among the working class. Camfield’s definition is nuanced and very inclusive, suggesting that the working class entails the entire range of working people—not only blue collar workers and low income earners, as many Canadians often assume.

Other uses of class categories are much narrower. For example, the federal government regards class-based issues strictly in economic terms and divides individuals into categories defined by absolute measures of income, specifically: Low income measures, Low-income cut-offs and Market basket measures, each of which produce very different results for assessing social “differences” (The Conference Board of Canada [TCBC], 2011). However, when considering quality of life in relation to that of most Canadians, it becomes clear that income levels alone cannot account for individuals’ or

families' ability to access or participate fully in all aspects of society, which often has a much larger impact on issues of belonging and well-being (TCBC, 2011).

Bourdieu, whose theories I use extensively in this study, never developed a “grand theory” of social class, nor did set out to operationalize the “working class” or any other specific class categories. Classes, he argued, are merely classes “on paper” that do not automatically correspond to real or practical categories. Rather, they are groups in which individuals “build up, negotiate and bargain over and play for” (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 75). Bourdieu’s conception of social class can account for many of the shortcomings of the above-mentioned uses, because it addresses innumerable dimensions of class.

Wacquant (2013) summarizes five other interrelated qualities that defined Bourdieu’s notions of social class: First, there is the *relational* aspect of social life, in which relations occur as intricate networks of material and symbolic ties between groups of individuals. Relations exist as institutions or *fields* of power that individuals occupy, “which constrain perceptions and action” (p. 2). Relations also exist in the form of the *habitus*, which is made up of the “mental schemata of perception and appreciation” through which we experience and construct our world (p. 2).

Second, social class is *agonistic*. It is focused on the struggle and competition for power (i.e., capital) through various fields and realms of daily life in which it may be acquired, controlled or contested. More specifically, the struggles that occur within one’s social location are determined by the volume and type of capital, and trajectories that mark the following three domains: mundane activities of ordinary life, the specialized fields of cultural production, and the public sphere, with each of these domains governed by increasingly authoritative representations of the social world.

Third, Bourdieu's work includes a "*symbolic dimension and mechanisms of group formation and domination*" (Wacquant, 2013, p. 3; emphasis in original). In Bourdieu's view, the world is constructed by the individuals and groups use "language, myth, religion, science, and assorted knowledge constructs," with class being the result of struggles that occur as one group imposes their view of the world on another (p. 3).

Fourth, class is *synthetic*, braiding together material relations, collective representations, and symbols of status that underpin social distinctions. Bourdieu's ideas bridge the opposition between objective and subjective views of class by acknowledging that individuals produce their own social reality through "mundane activities of sense-making" (Wacquant, 2013, p. 4), but do so based on their position in objective space that constrains or facilitates the production of that reality, and with the cognitive tools available to them within their given social location.

Finally, Bourdieu's *multiple correspondence analysis* is a complex method of statistical inquiry that uses the individual in her/his specific social location as "the unit of analysis" in comparison with variable-oriented statistical analyses which focus on individual determinants of class. Wacquant (2013) claims that taken together, these qualities ensure a close fit between "ontology, methodology and theory" (p. 6), as well as making transparent the philosophies that drive research processes.

Seeking the Elusive Canadian Working Class

Part of the challenge in identifying the working class stems from the fact that many traditional markers of social status have changed over a relatively short period, even within the last generation, contributing to an overall sense of class confusion (Micallef, 2014). For example, some of the most socially mobile and materially well-off

members of the working class I know are some of my friend's parents' and *all* my parents' friends who, with high school diplomas or less, could work their way up in manufacturing and other industries, where they started in entry level jobs that included unionized protection and paid benefits. But as Micallef (2014) points out, these kinds of rapidly disappearing "jobs for life" that enabled many working class families to participate in middle class consumer practices (thus allowing them to identify with the middle class) such as home ownership, the purchase of recreational vehicles, luxury holidays, or paying for their children's PSE, are not nearly as available to the children of these families today.

At the other end of the continuum, working class people who are most constrained by their social position fall into to the category of "working poor." Fleury and Fortin (2006) define the working poor as individuals and families who, on average, work full time hours throughout the course of a year, yet "experience a similar depth of poverty as the non-working poor" (p. 56). Low paid janitors and caregivers who receive little compensation for their labour and little autonomy over their work are examples. Class-based differences are not always or immediately visible to others, and they are more difficult to recognize than other markers of social difference such as gender or race. Invisibility however, does not protect vulnerable individuals from the consequences that class structures impose. Additionally, the relationship between an individual's class background and her/his educational and life trajectories is complex and involves more than just an individual's present economic and material circumstances; it emerges from a collective *history* of economic security or precariousness that underpins one's class

position and generates a specific disposition and practices that go along with it which help to reinforce and reproduce asymmetries of power and access.

As a case in point, Micallef (2014) refers to his meeting of a writer and self-identified member of a well-established middle class, who explained to him that individuals from her class category have something that the working class do not have and cannot purchase, something she refers to as the “glass bottom” through which middle class people cannot fall (p. 33). The glass bottom is knowledge acquired through a collective history of experiences that shape middle class sensibility, so that when they face financial adversity, for example, “there is always one more last resort” to fall back on—a savings bond, a forgotten investment, a relative who can lend money, or an inheritance to solve the problem later (p. 33). Not so for middle class posers however, for as Micallef (2014) observes, “When you run out of money, you run out of money” (p. 33). For the working class/working poor, there are no histories replete with accrued wealth or assets, prestigious work or powerful social connection to buoy them during times of hardship. There are no glass bottoms. Instead, the way down from a relatively comfortable position is often a sudden drop through a flimsy floor board.

In contrast to the “glass bottom,” Brine and Waller (2004) warn working class *women* specifically, about the hazards of the “class ceiling,” or “the structures and processes that prevent [them] from getting out of the cellar, not up to the roof” (Brine 1999, p. 2, cited in Brine & Waller, 2004, p. 99). Unlike the metaphor of the invisible glass ceiling, which is applied to *all* women, the class ceiling is:

Structured with harsh unbreakable materials, the kind of materials that can only be chipped at, materials that obscure the light, leaving only an odd chink filtering

through here and there ... [in which] education is both the chink of light and the harsh unbreakable material. (Brine, 1999, p. 2, cited in Brine & Waller, 2004, p. 99)

In sum, individuals from working class backgrounds share a collective history of economic struggle and/or precarity which has been passed down through generations, mostly in the form of taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world. In this way, working class knowledge is shaped by lived experiences about how the world works *for them*, informing a distinct set of values, perceptions and a way of being that is often misunderstood or unrecognizable to those who have solid footing in the dominant, middle class culture (Micallef, 2014). Teaching students that fundamental class differences emerge, in large part, from collective and unequal economic histories may help those from working class backgrounds plan their educational and occupational pursuits rationally and purposefully.

Theoretical Framework

“[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice”

~ Bourdieu (1984, p. 101)

Habitus is a relational concept in which interactions between individuals and their social world are at the crux of the theory. Habitus is a specific class-influenced disposition individuals acquire as a product of their early childhood socialization within the family, which in turn emerges from broader social, political and historical conditions. This is perhaps one of the most cited definitions of habitus:

A system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and

organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 53)

Habitus is a complex concept to be sure; in part because the components that organize it are neither calibrated nor easily defined (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992); instead, they are “polymorphic, supple and adaptable” making habitus an appropriate theoretical framework for exploring shifting identities in the context of broader social change (p. 23). In the present study, I flesh out the theory and its components by highlighting their presence in my experiences, i.e. my actions, perceptions and decision-making processes, within various educational settings I have participated in. What follows is merely an overview of Bourdieu’s theory.

Bourdieu was concerned with finding a mechanism to challenge what he believed were misleading dichotomies of structure/agency and theory/practice, and to explain the relationship between these poles in a way that would not over-emphasize the importance of one to the effect of ignoring the other (Reay, 2004b). As such a mechanism, habitus acknowledges “the social relations among actors as being structured *by*, and in turn, contributing to the structuring *of*, the social relations of power among different positions of class, gender, etc.” (Hillier & Rooksby, 2002, p. 4; emphasis added). As Bourdieu’s formula of social practice (above) indicates, any understanding of individuals and their actions, or *agency*, stems from a sociological analysis that recognizes the historical relationship between a classed habitus as it intersects with the dynamics and structures of a given field through which social practices are re/produced (Swartz, 2002).

As a product of social conditions, it follows that habitus is also a product of history, and though it is durable, the habitus may be changed over time as social conditions change, or through awareness and explicit efforts to engage in new experiences, education, or training (Bourdieu, 2002). For this reason, Bourdieu argued that habitus is “not a fate, not destiny” (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 29). In fact, he was once quoted as saying: “I said habitus so as *not* to say habit,” to emphasize the “generative (if not creative) capacity inscribed in the system of dispositions as an *art*” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 122, emphasis in original). Bourdieu (2002) maintained that practices generated by an individual or group of people occupying neighbouring positions in social space, are open and diverse— “but within limits” (p. 29). The generative quality of habitus is most apparent when a person finds her/himself in an unfamiliar *field*.

A field then, is a theoretical “space of conflict and competition” for limited and valued forms of capital (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 17). They are abstract sites of *real* struggles for power and recognition. However, as Swartz (2013) argues, it is the outcome of the struggle that is important to focus on, not the abstract site in which competition occurs. He advises that researchers who want to use the concept should:

First, identify some arena of struggle. Ask, what the struggle is over. ... Do not think of it simply in topological terms such as the space of all higher education institutions, or the arena of religion that would include all places of worship. ... Start with a struggle. (Swartz, 2013, p. 27)

Understood in this way, an individual occupying a field to which the habitus is accustomed will not struggle. More likely, s/he will feel as “a fish in water”: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted” (Bourdieu &

Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). In this case, there is little need to generate new strategies or perceptions because the norms, culture and practices of those who share the field are already taken for granted as being self-evident. However, if the habitus of an individual does not align with the dominant culture and practices of a new or unfamiliar environment, s/he may feel like the proverbial fish out of water, and experience an uncomfortable sense of discontinuity that pushes the habitus to adopt new strategies and perceptions in order to adapt, or to leave the competitive arena altogether. An example of this is when students from working class backgrounds self-select from university, based on past, negative experience of school and current perceptions that they are not capable of learning the kinds of abstract concepts and theories taught there, believing instead, that they are better suited to schools that provide practical, “hands on” learning experiences.

The concept of habitus would be limited in its utility if applied without also recognizing its relationship to *capital*, since the habitus is the embodiment of certain forms of capital. Bourdieu (1986) saw capital as “accumulated labour ... which, when appropriated on a private, i.e. exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour” (para. 1). As this definition implies, capital is more than an economic or financial asset; it also exists in the form of *social capital*, such as group membership that entitles participants to receive “credit” (in various senses of the word) from other group members; *symbolic capital*, such as recognized accomplishments that bestow prestige or honour on an individual; and *cultural capital* or socially recognized and valued experiences which Bourdieu described in terms of highbrow cultural activities such as attendance at operas, museums, libraries, and art galleries, for example (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). According to Bourdieu, as

cultural capital becomes internalized it is embodied by individuals through their speech patterns and dialects (i.e., as the subset of *linguistic capital*), as well as mannerisms, movements, style of dress, taste in leisure activities, food, literature, art, et cetera.

More recent interpretations of cultural capital include activities that focus on North American values. For example, Dimitriadis and Kamberelis (2006) define cultural capital as “resources that confer and reveal social status” such as education level and linguistic competence (p. 70), while Lareau and Weininger’s (2003) interpretation emphasizes “the direct or indirect ‘imposition’ of evaluative norms favoring the children or families of a particular social milieu” (pp. 597-598), which is a fundamental aspect of Bourdieu’s larger theory of social and cultural reproduction in which cultural capital features prominently. In this study, my use of the term cultural capital aligns with North American values.

Additionally, cultural capital exists in the following three states: the embodied state, or long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body that arise from experience and are “part of [one’s] normative socialization” (Heller, 2011, n. p.); the *objectified* state which includes material and cultural goods such as books, art, technology, etc.; and the *institutionalized* state, such as educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). These three types of capital may be exchanged from one form to another. For instance, an institutionalized form of cultural capital such as a degree from a respected university may be exchanged for symbolic capital, such as a high-status career. Having a prestigious job is likely to generate more capital, which in turn may be exchanged in the economic market for material goods, access to elite learning institutions, financial investments, et cetera, in a cycle that can be endlessly reproduced.

For Bourdieu, economic capital underpins and facilitates access to *all* the other forms of capital; however, economic capital alone does not guarantee an accumulation of more capital, nor does it guarantee the ability to transmit capital across generations, for example, when someone who comes from a long line of economic hardship wins the jackpot in a lottery, only to find himself no wealthier (and sometimes less so) not long after the big win. Thus, another necessary asset required for the re/production of an advantaged social position is “embodied capital,” as habitus is also referred to, that has been accrued *over a period of history* such that an individual, family or culture has an accrual of not only material or financial wealth, but also of legitimized forms of knowledge and experience in fields of economic power.

Back in the proposal stage of this study, I noticed an interest from within theoretical camps that have previously deemed Bourdieu’s work to be overly-deterministic, singularly focused, and/or reductive in nature, but who now have many of their researchers engaging productively with his theories. Among them are feminist scholars Walkerdine (1997), Reay (2006), and Skeggs (2004), each of whom has used Bourdieu’s concepts to explore gendered experiences of class, often drawing on their own working class backgrounds to do so. Additionally, they critique and expand upon Bourdieu’s notions of reflexivity, habitus and capital. Likewise, critical race scholar Yosso (2005), whose work I refer to, interrogates Bourdieu’s somewhat limited application of reproduction theory by expanding on the forms of capital. In this study, I draw not only from Bourdieu’s original work, but also from these and other contemporary social theory scholars who have chosen to “use, critique, critically extend, and develop Bourdieu’s social theory” (Adkins, 2004a, p. 3). Doing so allows me to

engage in a current, place-specific and more nuanced exploration of the issues I present here.

Bourdieu himself came from “modest origins,” and he conceived of *habitus* as a “structural theory of practice” that arose from his interest in human agency (Hillier & Rooksby, 2002, p. 4). I too, would be remiss to forget the impact of my earliest introductions to theories of human agency and their continued influence on my thinking today. When I started my journey into higher education at community college it was the humanistic and existentialist thinkers, Frankl, Gardner, Maslow, and Fromm whose perspectives on the human condition and the capacities of individuals to exercise agency in the direst circumstances made sense to me at an intuitive level and gave me hope that change was possible. Although my introduction to their work was cursory at the college level, it sparked my desire for further learning about this approach to exploring the human condition, and facilitated my eventual pursuit of a bachelor’s degree in psychology at university.

One of the surprising discoveries I made through conducting this autoethnography is that my decision to participate in PSE has not been very instrumental, overall. I discovered that it has always been my ticket into a world where reading, discovery, reflection and writing are considered legitimate and important pursuits. Even when I was taking career-oriented programs such as my teaching assistant program at college, or a bachelor of education (which I started when I was enrolled in a university transfer program but later abandoned in favour of psychology) I took every opportunity to explore the kinds of philosophical and abstract subjects I was fascinated by, certain that I would no longer be able to access them once I left school and returned to “real” life as I has

always known it. An understanding of academic life as another kind of real life never entered my personal realm of possibility until I met my partner.

Linking Theory and Method Through Epistemology

Epistemology, or what we know and how we come to know it, is the foundation of inquiry and it has a direct influence on the theoretical framework, methodology and methods researchers choose (Carter & Little, 2007). My choice of theoretical framework is based on my valuation of the subjective, lived experience of class. The foundations of my understanding come from practical experience that has shown me that there are many ways to experience working class life. My understanding of social class is irreducible to a single variable, or any consistent combination of measures of my social status. Although lived experience is typically not recognized as legitimate knowledge in institutions of higher learning, Bourdieu (1991) maintained that “habitus” is intended, among other things, to reveal “a practical knowledge that has its own logic, which cannot be reduced to that of theoretical knowledge; that in a sense, agents know the social world better than the theoreticians” (as cited in Reay, 2004b, p. 438).

Autobiographical writing, such as the construction of an autoethnography, is another way of knowing. Although, as Richardson (1994) points out, we tend to think of writing as a way of telling about ourselves and the world, it can also be a method of discovery and analysis in which “form and content are inseparable” (p. 516). As a means of “telling” what I know, autoethnography allows me to access and make my classed and gendered experiences of education accessible to others. It is a radical approach to inquiry that gives voice to seldom-heard perspectives and it is the *only* way I know how to explore my educational history and shifting identity (Wall, 2006). In a sense, I did not

choose autoethnography at all; it chose me. These qualities dovetail with the construct of habitus, as Bourdieu (2002) once explained, “The notion of habitus, and the idea of practical mastery, practical logic, and so on, necessitate and effect *a radical break with the scholastic bias* that threatens most of the analysts of art, as teachers, that is lectores, scholars” (p. 32; emphasis added).

Moreover, the construct of habitus does not define individuals through a static classed position. Davey (2009) maintains that it “embraces continuity and change, offering a more fluid and dynamic understanding of classed identities” (p. 276). The strength of such an adaptable theory is apparent in the large body of current research that speaks to its effectiveness as a tool for gaining insight into the ways that not only class, but other social structures and background characteristics help to shape individual dispositions (See Corbett (2007a; 2014) on rurality; Edgerton (2010) on gender, for Canadian examples.)

These studies and others suggest that *habitus* can provide an effective theoretical framework to explore and discuss different aspects of my own identity that are inextricably intertwined with my class background. Bourdieu consistently stated that “habitus” is about “the integration or the lack of integration of the disparate experiences that make up a biography” (Reay, 2015, p. 11). The theory of habitus allows me to accomplish my goals for this research because, abstract though it may be, it is imbued with “practical logic” that understands and speaks directly to the kinds of fractured and seemingly disconnected experiences of class differences that lie at the centre of my researcher positioning and epistemology.

CHAPTER THREE: A METHOD/OLOGY FOR OUTLIERS

“We can tell other stories. These stories can be very frightening because they appear to blow apart the fictions through which we have come to understand ourselves.”

~Walkerline (1990, p. xiv)

Autoethnography is both a research *methodology*, as well as a *method* (Chang, 2008); it is both the “process and product” of narrative inquiry (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, para. 1). Perhaps the most cited definition of this method of qualitative narrative inquiry comes from Ellis and Bochner (2000) who explain autoethnography as an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). The authors introduced a “triadic model” by which “autoethnographers emphasize the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)” (p. 740). Different researchers may emphasize different elements of the triage, resulting in different outcomes. Just as each person’s experiences are unique from one another, the form and emphasis of each autoethnography varies in accordance with the specific needs, desires and interests of the individual (Chang, 2008; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Regardless of where the emphasis lies however, broader social or cultural context can never be completely separated from the story; it is implicitly or explicitly “realized in the individual’s narrative” (Antikainen & Komonen, 2003, p. 6). Therefore, a story about the self is always to some degree “a story about the world surrounding the self” (p. 6).

Narrative forms of autoethnography, such as this one, may range from the “evocative,” “vulnerable,” “therapeutic,” “confessional,” or another subjective style of autobiographical accounts that Ellis (2004) describes, to the more objective form of “cultural analysis with narrative details” advocated by Chang (2008), to the systematic,

reflexive, in-field analysis of the individual that Bourdieu (2007) coined “self-socioanalysis.” These variants all have the same intention, which is to produce deeper understanding and connection of one’s experiences to the wider social and cultural world.

Phenomenologically, narrative forms of inquiry such as autoethnography are used to answer the question “Who am I”? (Antikainen & Komonen, 2003, p. 6), or in my case, “Who am I *becoming*?” Autoethnography follows an existential tradition, doing work that involves finding and making meaning out of human struggles for identity and belonging (Bochner, 2013). Rather than emphasizing an objective reality, autoethnography allows individuals to *re-create* their own reality through the process of ascribing meaning to events and past experiences from the perspectives of both the individual and society. As such, the meanings that emerge from life stories are “not stable and universal, but changing and contextual (Antikainen & Komonen, 2003, p. 6).

Autoethnography emerges from postmodern philosophy. Postmodern approaches to inquiry reject dominant positivistic understandings that maintain legitimate research is neutral and free of bias (Wall, 2006). They challenge the dominance of conventional scientific approaches through the contention that data (i.e. “reality”) is socially constructed (Bochner, 2013; Wall, 2006). In both quantitative and more traditional forms of qualitative inquiry, for example, the researcher’s voice is silenced. Autoethnography however, honours the subjective experience as a legitimate source of knowledge and the voice of the reflexive researcher as a trust-worthy conduit for that knowledge.

Reflexivity, from a postmodern viewpoint “questions assumptions and does not treat knowledge as the domain of a chosen few in intellectual elite” (Anderson, 2008, p. 186). For Bourdieu, reflexivity took on a very specific purpose. Rather than making

moral assumptions about private experiences, he believed that the researcher should focus her efforts “to control sociologically the distortions introduced in the construction of the object” first, by recognizing her own position and dispositions within the academic field, and second, “by adopting a ‘scholastic point of view’ on society” (Wacquant, 1990, p. 683). In this way, reflexivity can alter the cognitions of the researcher engaged in social inquiry (Wacquant, 1990). Additionally, it provides the reader with a means to recognize and challenge the researcher’s assumptions and experiences in the interpretation of a study’s findings (Wall, 2006).

Although influenced by postmodern philosophy, autoethnographers do not reject the contributions of post-positivism but maintain that “many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimate and that no one way should be privileged” (Wall, 2006, p. 2). As a would-be autoethnographer from a post-positivist research background I agree with Bochner (2013) who states that facts, presented as numbers, percentages and statistics, “are important to an autoethnographic storyteller but facts don’t tell you what they mean or how they may make you feel” (p. 54). The following self-description represented by the “facts” alone, illustrates this point:

Statistical Me

Across OECD countries, I am among 7% of individuals in a cohort aged 35-44 (as of 2011) to have gained tertiary qualifications they did not have at 25-34 years of age (OECD 2011, p. 13). Additionally, a Canadian survey of individuals of my age cohort (N=733) indicates that I belong with the 3.7% of the women in that group to obtain a bachelor’s degree more than 15 years after graduating from high school (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 122). Of that 3.7%, I belong among the 8% who continue to

professional or graduate studies. The same study indicates that I am among the 6% of women without a bachelor's degree, 15 years after graduating from high school, to have had no children (N=0), and < 1% of women without bachelor degrees after this same length of time, to be unmarried.

No wonder I have often struggled to feel “normal!” Muncey (2010) explains that researchers’ work involves understanding populations, “and through this, the individuals who make up populations” (p. xi). Populations studied via the use of large scale surveys usually label people like me “outliers.” The term refers to those individuals whose complexity contributes too many intervening variables to the study (Muncey, 2010). They are signified on a scatter plot as value points that hang self-consciously at the margins of the data set, which is probably why I sense kinship among them. As an undergraduate in a mainstream psychology program, my interest and sympathies were always with these unassuming yet troublesome deviations from the norm. They still are. Through my life experiences, I have learned that class is, in large part, about mutable identities and an often-difficult process of “negotiation between competing subjectivities as other spaces, other possibilities are opened up” (Lucey, Melody & Walkerdine, 2003, p. 286). However, these kinds of subjective, felt experiences of class are silenced in quantitative studies. So, while I appreciate the use of statistical analyses and recognize that they tell one part of a story; autoethnography tells an equally important “other.”

In qualitative and mixed methods studies, those of us who attempt to cross the “great divide” from working class to middle class via a university education are accurately described as “straddlers” (Lubrano, 2004), “floaters” (Corbett, 2007b), “cultural outsiders” (Lehmann, 2007), “edgewalkers,” or “border crossers” (Chang,

2008), each of which implies an ambiguous sense of place and belonging. Personally, I prefer to stick with the name “outlier,” not only as a respectful nod to my research origins, but because as an outlier, I feel secure in knowing where I stand. Besides, being an “outlier” sounds kind of bad-ass; describing myself as a “floater” ... not so much.

Data Collection and Analysis

Moderating a panel of speakers at a Canadian Studies conference on education held at my university recently, a professor seated next to me takes an opportunity to introduce herself during the break. I, in turn, tell her that I am a graduate student in education. For a few minutes, we chat amicably about the panelists and their presentations. Then, to my dismay, and with a long minute to spare before having to introduce the next set of speakers, she cheerily asks me the Dreaded Question, “So, what is your thesis about?” Hmm...and just when I thought we were getting along.

“I’m writing an autoethnography about my educational experiences as someone from a working class background” I hear myself saying, a bit more self-consciously than I would have liked. My inner disciplinarian gives me the what-for about feeling awkward. Why should I be embarrassed?! Am I that afraid to come out of the class closet? Or am I more concerned that others will think I am a narcissist, seeing as I am the subject of my own research? Maybe... on both accounts. Certainly, I feel more than a slight identification with Kuhn (1995) who wrote, “What right I have to subordinate history to my own puny existence?” (p. vi). Whatever the source of my unease, I can’t escape the feeling that I’m doing something vaguely inappropriate.

“Come on Sandra, how are you going to finish your thesis if you can’t even talk to a professor about it!?” I silently scold myself. Fortunately, the organizer of the

conference lets me know that it's almost time to introduce the next set of speakers. Saved by the bell, and not for the first time. But as I rise to leave my seat, my neighbor leans over and whispers knowingly, even sympathetically I think, and says, "Ohhh, autoethnography! It's like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall, isn't it?"

The metaphor of nailing Jell-O to the wall perfectly captures what my introduction to autoethnography has been like. As soon as I think I have managed to articulate something, the “emergent quality” of the autoethnographic writing, usually in the form of new information or a flash of insight, disrupts my train of thought (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 57). Then, things I thought I knew to be true about myself and others seem to slide away. To get those “truths” back, I start again, trying a fresh angle of approach, setting a different tone to the writing, or attempting some other textual format (haiku anyone?) only to see the data in a slightly different light once again. This circular process of writing, self-doubting, self-censorship, and re-telling continues ad infinitum (and ad nauseam). The mess is then hidden from the reader and the finished thesis is presented as a seamless piece of writing produced from the mind of a well-organized thinker. Only in this case, nothing could be further from the truth. What follows is my attempt to impose order on the chaos and bring transparency to the method.

Memory Data

The narratives I have created are based on *my* memories of formal and informal educational experiences that have haunted me over the years. Through these short vignettes, I explore the intersections of my classed, raced and gendered ways of knowing, negotiating and sense-making. Obviously, I have not gone through my life carrying a voice recorder or taking copious notes on my experiences at the time they occurred. In

fact, apart from keeping a research diary for this study, I consider myself to be a very poor keeper of journals. And, admittedly, memory may not always be the most reliable source of data. Some of the memories I explore in this study are more than four decades old, begging the question, how accurate can they be? A study of alumnus' experiences of rural education however, demonstrates that despite informants' recollections going back as much as 50 years, the detailed information they provided indicated that "it was clear that adolescence ... was a crucial time for educational decision making" (Corbett, 2007a, p. 774). I would stress that in the present study my focus is not on historical accuracy; my purpose is to explore and better understand my subjective experience of class in different educational and social fields.

Kuhn (1995) claims that the act of remembering is a practice that allows the researcher to excavate and make public the stories of private lives "lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of the culture don't quite work" (p. 8). If the events I base my stories on seem ordinary, that is exactly the point. Mundane events are imbued with "objective relations"—interactions that can be observed, recorded, or otherwise made tangible for "those with empiricist dispositions," but which cannot be reduced to tangibles alone (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 16). My goal is to get underneath those relations to uncover the structures within the many irreducible interactions from which taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom are produced (Bourdieu, 1989).

Chang (2008) explains that the process of generating data, classifying and analyzing are all interconnected in autoethnography. As you might imagine, things can (and do) get messy very quickly. I had always perceived my memories as representing a

long series of random and disconnected events that make up my life, but as I wrote them down, grappled with their meaning and tried to organize them, I began to see how they could be used as a sort of map, allowing me to make sense of how I arrived in the social space I occupy today. To facilitate this map-making exercise, I put them into a chronological order, as opposed to organizing by themes.

As I organized, I edited, either adding details to enhance the evocative quality of the narratives or removing details that I and/or my committee recognized as a posing potential risk to the anonymity and/or confidentiality of the many “unofficial participants” who are implicated in them. Although I modified minor details in this way throughout the duration of the research process, re-writing most, if not all of the narratives dozens of times, I feel that the changes I made were superficial and did not change the nature of events as I recalled them.

I believe my ability to recall certain places and events in great detail over long periods of time has served me well as it has helped me to develop a critical perspective on education and social difference. This ability, in conjunction with an education that is focused on issues of social justice has also allowed me to make “the personal political,” for as Bourdieu (1984) observed: “Difference is perceived and denounced as such only by people whose awareness has been sharpened by political or union activity, those whom others say, *‘[Elle] fait de la politique’*” (p. 381; emphasis in original).

Personal Documents

School documents: I was surprised to discover that my mom had kept my elementary and junior high school report cards for all these years. I had no idea they still existed, complete with teacher’s comments, until I told my parents I was going to do a

thesis on my educational experiences as a student from the working class. This simple, unspoken act of preservation speaks volumes, to me at least, about my parents' valuation of education - both their children's and their own. For example, in my interview with my dad, he spoke so proudly about graduating *cum laude* from trade school and he swears he still has his report card from that time, lying around at somewhere at home.

Interestingly, my parents could not find any of my high school transcripts. This gave me cause to wonder: As much as the keeping of those earlier report cards may have indicated how much my parents value education and their pride in my academic abilities, so too might the loss of those high school records, that came from a time when my academic performance plummeted and our familial life circumstances were at an all-time low, indicate a (subconscious) desire not to be reminded of hard times. Or maybe they just got lost in the shuffle. At any rate, I contacted Alberta Education and they sent me a complete list of my marks for every course I had taken from Grade 10 to Grade 12, and the two courses I took in my extra semester after graduating from high school.

Thus, official school documents such as old report cards, transcripts and awards, contribute a second source of data to the study. Anderson and Glass-Coffin (2013) state that the value of personal documents in autoethnographic research lies in their "evocative potential—[their] ability to open the researcher to deeper reflection ... or to evoke compelling images, emotions or understandings in other readers" (p. 68). For example, re-reading my teachers' evaluations in my old elementary school report cards opened me up to new, depersonalized understandings as I viewed them through a lens of social theory. Revisiting personal documents made me more aware of the limits of my memory as well. For example, I had come to believe that my fear of math was based in a lifetime

of academic struggle with this subject. Yet my report cards show that I was consistently an A and B student in Math up until Grade 9. Clearly, there was something to investigate.

Interview Data and Transcription

Interview transcripts from my parents are another source of data that makes an important unique contribution to this autoethnography. Given the importance of early family socialization and the transmission of cultural capital from parents to their children to the formation of the habitus and educational trajectories, I wanted to interview my parents about their experiences of growing up in the Netherlands where they were educated, and in Canada once they had become parents of school-aged children. Rather than a formal interview setting, I decided to engage with each of my parents' separately in a relaxed yet focused conversation in my home while they were visiting.

Knowing that in my family it is not unusual to lose the thread of a conversation and end up somewhere other than where we intended, my decision to use semi-structured questions as opposed to open-ended questions helped to ensure I remained tethered to the purpose of the study. I found that semi-structured questions allowed enough "room" for reflection and spontaneity in my parent's answers, and left the conversation open for further questioning on my part, while keeping me and my parents on track, or at least allowing me to find the way back into the interview when we fell off!

I transcribed the interviews verbatim and made decisions about how to use and present them as I progressed through my research process. As I listened to the recording of my parents' interviews repeatedly, trying to capture each word, hesitation and gesture as I remembered, pictured, or could confirm with my notes, I realized that

sometimes their body language conveyed more than their actual words. For example, my dad's hand raised as if to strike a disobedient child when he described what his own parents would have done if he failed to make room for the doctor, priest, teacher, or anyone else deemed to have authority over him if they walked past him on a sidewalk; or spread wide with palms facing upwards as he shrugged in resignation as he recalled feeling exploited in his first experiences in the Canadian labour force. Likewise, my mom suddenly breaking eye contact with me and moving her gaze to the floor as she spoke about an elementary school teacher who nearly tore her ear from her head, and being isolated from her classmates as she was regularly sent into the school attic to work alone. Or her spontaneous eruption of laughter when recalling that she had stitched over 200 pairs of men's underwear backwards at her first factory job—these kinds of gestures spoke louder, and often said more, than their words but I could not capture these gestures in my write-up, at least not without adding considerable length to my transcriptions and this study. Striking a balance between being concise and descriptive was no easy feat. Ultimately, I made the following transcription decisions:

In place of lengthy descriptions of my parents' body language, facial expressions, etc. I have inserted wherever possible a word or phrase that they were trying to express. This is set apart in squared brackets. However, I have never replaced one of their words for another or changed the order of their words. Additionally, all cuts to the dialogue are shown with ellipses. When presenting the data in the final write-up, I chose to remove most, but not all the repetitions and linguistic tics (i.e., "you know," "um," etc.) and anything else that I thought could potentially confuse readers (Bourdieu et al., 1999). I did this to make reading easier for the audience, while trying to retain as much of the

“flavour” of my familial conversational style as possible. Most importantly, I wanted to ensure that my transcriptions and translations accurately represented my parents’ *intended* meanings.

Ethical Considerations

“How can we not feel anxious about making private words public, revealing confidential statements made in the context of a relationship based on a trust that can only be established between two individuals?”

~ Bourdieu et al. (1999, p. 1)

Obtaining Consent

When I invited my parents to participate in my study, my mom’s response was an enthusiastic, “*Well, sure!*” My dad’s reply was a bit slower. Before providing his consent he asked me somewhat wryly, “*Will I need a lawyer?*” While his question was in jest (I think) it does bear careful consideration, for as Bourdieu et al. (1999) go on to remind us, “No contract carries as many unspoken conditions as one based on trust” (p. 1). Of course, my first steps in the research process were purely instrumental, but after completing them I soon entered what I think of as the “grey zone” of ethical research. I discuss this further in “The Risks of Writing Autoethnography” section below, but first let me briefly describe the instrumental aspect of obtaining consent.

I sought approval from the Brock University Research Ethics Board before commencing with the study. After I obtained authorization (REB File No. 13-225), I provided each of my parents with an informed consent letter which gave them another opportunity to review the study and ask questions about the process to which they had given their verbal agreed to take part in. This was done before officially “signing on” and potentially giving away personal information that could not be protected by a

guarantee of confidentiality. Additionally, I provided each of them with copies of my finished transcripts to review and comment on as part of the qualitative research process known as “member checking” (Tilley and Powick, 2002), which I describe further under “Establishing Credibility”

Confidentiality

Chang (2008) argues that “autoethnographers, like other researchers of human subjects, are charged with adhering to the ethical principles of confidentiality” (p. 56). These types of “relational concerns,” as Ellis et al. (2011) describe, are especially complicated in autoethnography because the identity of others who are familiar to the researcher may be revealed through descriptions of the places s/he has lived, worked or attended school. While my parents stated that they were not concerned about personal confidentiality, I could not obtain consent or guarantee complete confidentiality for the many “unofficial” participants in this study (i.e., past teachers, old school friends, classmates, etc. who are implicated) and who could potentially recognize themselves or be recognized by others in the final write up. To address this concern, I attempted to protect their identities by assigning pseudonyms and by altering or omitting other identifying characteristics when necessary (Ellis, 2004). Receiving input from trusted and knowledgeable others (i.e., my supervisor and committee members whose objectivity was invaluable to this end) was extremely helpful. In this study, pseudonyms are assigned to everyone I mention in my narratives (other than my parents and myself). In smaller settings, I have even omitted the names of the towns I lived in and schools I attended as a means to protect the identities of old childhood friends, teachers, neighbours, and classmates. In addition, in cases where committee members spotted possible problems I

returned to the text and eliminated the potential identifying information in question.

The Risks of Writing Autoethnography

Autoethnography, as one of my committee members accurately suggested, is not for “the faint of heart.” I knew this going into it, or at least thought I did, but the reality is even more challenging than the expression conveys. The story I wanted and struggled to write, but ultimately was unable to organize into a master’s thesis, was considerably longer than this document (some 80 plus pages longer). I had to leave out many of the narratives and half-completed analyses that depicted most of my experiences as an adult learner, if I was to maintain an appropriate length and scope for the project. Yet somehow, my recognition of the impossibility of telling the “whole story” did not stop me from repeatedly attempting to cram in everything I felt I needed to explain the winding path I have taken through to adulthood, higher education and middle class life. Not surprisingly perhaps, I failed, and in the eleventh hour (well beyond that really, since I had been granted an extension) I had to admit defeat. I was demoralized and emotionally depleted from my efforts.

In my mind, the whole story is still in this document, but of course that is not true, and never was. Only a very small portion of my life is represented here. Having my supervisor and committee point out the unexplained gaps in this abridged version, which I had become blind through my many revisions, was crucial to my ability to produce a document that might be valuable to a wider audience. I hope the ways in which I have tried to address their questions and comments will help me tell, if not a complete story, a partial one that is cohesive, so that anyone who reads this will recognize the value of reading, conducting, and writing autoethnography.

The opportunity to interview each of my parents about my upbringing and their involvement in my education was a gift. At the risk of sounding anti-intellectual, I would describe the process as healing. Bourdieu himself once explained that the interview process can be used as a kind of “spiritual exercise,” in which the interviewer forgets herself temporarily to attain a “true conversion” of the way she views her participants in their necessary and ordinary life circumstances (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 614). He claims that the “welcoming disposition,” which facilitates the interviewer’s ability to make the respondent’s struggles her own, “is a sort of *intellectual love*: a gaze that consents to necessity” (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 614; emphasis in original). I had suspected, going into this project, that my parents would be earnest participants. Still, I was surprised at how frank and willing they were to share what *they* understood as personal failures and disappointments, whether it was regarding their involvement in my brother’s and my education, in their marriage or in their parenting. The degree of humility that each expressed when sharing their reflections on these experiences humbled me in turn. For example, when I asked my dad about his involvement in my education he confessed that he felt he had not been a “good parent.”

Sandra: *Do you remember helping me with homework or anything like that?*

Jacques: *I remember I sat with you, but I had a short fuse. I couldn’t see that you couldn’t see it, you know what I mean?*

Sandra: *Oh, I remember those times; they were not good.*

Jacques: *How stupid [sighing]. Well, yeah, I was not the best um, I, it could have been different; I know that. I think actually, in a way—well you know that as well as I do—that was not the best time in my life. I was fairly occupied with myself... driving to*

the city and back, and I played soccer and fairly heavy on the booze and so, you know... There's room for improvement there, but I do that in my next life.

Sandra: *I'll give you a "B."*

D: *Well, a "B," then you give me way too much [smiling ruefully] ... I should have had kids when I was 50 years old, and never before. ... Well, some people know at 18 what they want. I didn't know it when I was 40, for fuck sakes; I never did! And for that kind of a person, I think kids at 50 is about right on.*

Sandra: *Well, you made a good parent—in the end.*

Jacques: *It could have been a lot's worse [sic], but no, no, I didn't make a good parent.*

The interviews with my parents enabled me to dive into the heart of my seemingly short but rich family history of coalminers, factory line workers, and small-time farmers, all of whom had abbreviated relationships and thus limited experience with, institutionalized forms of education. As I learned more about my working class history I began to recognize how classed struggles throughout generations of my family persisted in the form of many of the relationship and communication problems I experienced with my parents as I was growing up. I understand our collective, unspoken desire to simply find a way to live better as being manifested through my participation in higher education and my parents' willingness to share in as much of this experience with me as they can.

When I finally conceded to being able to share *parts* of the story, never the whole, my initial framing of the problem required me to prioritize earlier aspects of my educational and social trajectories. Many other valuable pieces of the transcription, and

many of the narratives I had written and wanted to explore could not be properly contextualized within the limited scope and space of this study.

Deciding what to include and what to leave behind was one of the most difficult aspects of writing up this autoethnography. I fear that I have depicted only the bleakest parts of my family life and that I never got to discuss the joy, love, humour, and wisdom that were also part of my upbringing, or the close bonds I share with my parents and my brother today because we have endured these hardships and managed to grow beyond them, together. These aspects of family life became much more clear to me after I left home, and they were portrayed mostly in the narratives about my university/adult learner experiences which are unfortunately, on “the cutting room floor.” I worry that my parents will feel hurt when they read my thesis in its entirety (and I believe they will read it) even though I am confident that my research is ethically sound, and that I have recorded the “truth” as I experienced it then.

Establishing Credibility

With regard to the memory data used in this study, I have taken steps to try to ensure accuracy as much as possible: I have checked my facts with my other two “informants” (i.e., my parents), I have returned to the geographical sites where many of these memories originate from as a way to enhance my remembrances, and I have used multiple data sources, and strategies, listed below, to help me return to and depict my memories from the perspectives I held at the time these events occurred.

Member Checking

I offered my parents, as well as my partner, who was not a participant but is implicated in parts of this study, full disclosure of my work through the process of

“member checking.” Through this process they could see how they were being represented in my writing and provide me with feedback to ensure that I was using their words as per their intended meaning (Tilley and Powick, 2002). My parents read my entire 50-page proposal along with their interview transcriptions. While my dad commented that seeing his speech on paper made him feel inarticulate (a feeling that anyone who has participated in the member checking process as an interviewee can likely relate to), he and my mom both consented for me to use their words as I had transcribed them. I was not able to provide my parents with a complete draft of my thesis in time for them to comment on the document in its entirety. While not an expectation or requirement for conducting research, I still would have preferred that they had read it through before its final stage. Given the intimate nature of our relationships, I feel like I am in a “grey” zone, ethically speaking, because I care deeply about how my final representations will affect my parents. My partner, however, did read through my final draft and felt it was acceptable.

Crystallization

Relating “ways of knowing” to the many angles and transmutations of a crystal, Richardson (1994) coined the term “crystallization” to describe multi genre and creative forms of representation with which to analyze data. As such, “crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 1997 cited in Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 208). To increase the credibility and rigour of my study, I included multiple data sources apart from the personal memories from which I produced several short narratives. As I mentioned and described above, these include my parent’s interview transcripts, research diary entries and school-related documents. These

additional sources not only allowed me to provide “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of the necessary details to produce evocative narratives that are believable, but also to support and/or challenge long-held perceptions of my upbringing and schooling, often to the paradoxical effect of leading me to “know more and doubt what [I] know” (Richardson, 2005, p. 208).

Researcher Assumptions

I acknowledge two main assumptions that underpin the present study. The first is that higher education is a valuable opportunity for personal development. Accordingly, information and resources required to make informed decisions about what has increasingly become “a central activity” for young adults should be equally accessible to everyone (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 115). I recognize that a university education, *per se*, may not be something that everyone wants or feels the need obtain, nonetheless, I maintain that the means to informed decision-making about *all* types of PSE should not be determined by a students’ family income, the kind of schools they attended, geographic location, or familial experience with postsecondary institutions and their inner workings (Tranter, 2003).

As I noted earlier, the dominant discourse emphasizes individualism and meritocracy and relates these principles to middle class markers of individual success, such as increasingly higher level of educational attainment and upward social mobility (Lehmann, 2013). Thus, my second assumption is that social class is more than an individual experience or a personal pursuit; class is always implicated with farther reaching social, economic and political circumstances. However, the effects of structural forces on individual lives are often minimized to the extent of blaming the victim (Jones

& Vagle, 2013). The so-called “failure to launch,” whether into university, a “legitimate” career, home ownership, a family of one’s own, et cetera, may be internalized as a personal failure and young adults from working class backgrounds may be left wondering why, despite their best efforts, they have not been able to obtain these kinds of mainstream status symbols that are assumed to signify personal success and a productive life course.

To be clear, it is not my intention to minimize the role of the individual (i.e., myself) in decision-making processes and the life experiences that result. However, given the disproportionate emphasis on individual success and failure, my aim for this study is to become more attuned to what Jones and Vagle (2013) describe as “the possibility of personal *effect* ... against a discourse of personal failure” (p.131; emphasis in original), and to explore how this re-framing might impact the narratives we, students from working class backgrounds, tell ourselves as we make our way through the higher education system and adulthood.

Unfortunately, I have never been all that comfortable with academic language or those who speak it as fluently as their first language, as my many nerve-wracked presentations, reluctance to speak up in seminars and aversion to meeting with my professors will attest. Bourdieu (1989) observed that when “the dominated” (e.g., a working class student) is obliged to adopt the dominant (e.g., academic) language, it is most likely to be expressed as a “*broken language* ... and [her] linguistic capital is more or less completely devalued” (as cited in Wacquant, 1989, p. 46; emphasis in original). Long before learning about Bourdieu or social theory, self-consciousness about my broken “academish” has kept me from speaking up in university. I relate to my dad who

said this about his English-speaking abilities: “*Actually, I could read pretty good. The only thing is my pronunciation; it sounded stupid to my own ears.*”

Now however, I feel that there is more at stake for me than accolades or even credentials as I complete my thesis project. My greater concern is that I do not make my research impenetrable to those who were most influential in shaping my early identity. That is, my family of origin, my childhood friends, and their families who knew me long before I learned that plain speaking is a characteristic of the working class “lexicon”; before report cards and transcripts became “cultural artifacts”; before my need to understand *us* and how *I* happened to land in a position that has access to more advantages and privileges than I know what to do with became a thesis topic in which both the subject and language I use to write about it will be evaluated and quite possibly, found wanting.

Despite my linguistic challenges, or perhaps because of them, I have become more aware of how language and discourse are used in my environment, and even more so since starting a graduate program that emphasizes “social justice, the right to know [and] the right to be creative and intellectually awake to our social and literary inheritance” (Brock University, Faculty of Education, 2010, para. 3).

Scope of the Study

This study is an analysis of one. It explores *my* subjective experiences of education and upward mobility alone, and situates them within historical and social contexts. My intention is not to generalize my findings to other individuals or groups of students. Even if it were not irresponsible to do so, I would not presume to speak for anyone other than myself because I believe that each person

has a unique story to tell. Besides, sharing personal experience can make an important contribution to the research community in and of itself:

The act of narrating one's biography can be considered as a type of discourse: when an individual narrates her biography using language actively, she constructs her version of the events in her life and their meaning. From this perspective, a biography is a text and a cultural product. (Antikainen & Komonen, 2003, p. 7)

That being said, few things would make me feel as satisfied as knowing that if someone came across my study they might experience a "realistic identification," or maybe even feel exonerated by my evocations of various educational struggles, both insignificant and consequential, as I did when I read the work of scholars from working class backgrounds and the words of working class students who participated in the many empirical studies that assisted me with this self-analysis (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 113).

The Study

There is a prologue for each narrative that provides contextual information for the reader and serves to provide some cohesion between narratives. This prologue is, of course, followed by the actual narrative, which is based on a personal memory of a formal or informal educational experience I have had. The narratives are set apart in italics, as are direct quotes from my parents' interview transcripts. The prologues and analyses that follow are in regular font. In the analysis, I used theory, empirical studies and statistics, school-related personal documents, and interview transcripts as supporting, contradicting or sometimes confounding evidence.

As I stated earlier, the narratives follow a chronological order, though I have categorized them under the headings of linguistic capital, rurality, race, gender, and cleft

habitus. These headings can be considered as themes, broadly speaking, as I have focused my analysis for each narrative on its heading. However, my understandings of social class (and concepts such as gender/feminism, race/White privilege, etc.) are intersectional, thus the connection between a narrative and its given heading may be more, or less obvious, to the reader, from one story to another. For example, the narrative *Science Lesson* is part of my rural experience so it falls under the heading of “rurality,” but it could have just as easily (or perhaps better) fit under “gender.” Nonetheless, given my aim for this study, to trace the path that led me here, chronological order made sense.

As usual for me in my academic work, I found it difficult to stick with one mode of written communication. In this study, the language I use oscillates between an admittedly imperfect but more conventional academic style (as in the first three chapters of this thesis) and a looser, more conversational style, which I prefer. This type of writing, which jumps back and forth between trying to be academic and wanting to “just be myself” is how I try to please everyone. Unfortunately, it exposes a bit more of the real me than I would normally like, linguistic insecurities and all, when I am in an academic environment or among intellectual people. The discrepancy between my authentic voice, which I feel is never accurately represented in any of my academic writing (including this study) and my desire to be understood and taken seriously by members of an intellectual community is part of the cleft in my habitus.

CHAPTER FOUR: DEMYSTIFYING THE SELF

“I discovered little by little, mainly through the gaze of others, the peculiarities of my own habitus.”

~ Bourdieu (2007, p. 89)

Bourdieu (2007) claimed, “To understand is first to understand the field with which and against which one has been formed” (p. 4). For this reason, I decided to start this chapter, not with my earliest recollections of growing up and being educated as a working class girl in rural Alberta, but with a narrative that describes a more recent event—a birthday party for a friend’s child. The conversation I have reproduced here is not verbatim; it is a composite of many similar conversations I hear among the parents I socialize with these days. With this introductory narrative, I attempt to provide the reader with a glimpse into the social and cultural world, or the *field* of class relations in which I began to develop a critical perspective on social class difference, inequality, and education through the unexpected but certain recognition of my own difference.

Although I had often reflected on the incidents described in my narratives, producing a reflexive and critical analyses for each proved to be more difficult than I had realized in the early stages of this project. In this study, there is always a double analysis going on: there is an acknowledgement and analysis of my educationally privileged researcher-self, who in turn analyzes the experiences of my working class girl/woman-self. Through this process I have come to recognize that I have certain sympathies and interests that limit what I can easily understand about my own experiences. As James (2015) puts it, “Where someone is accustomed to seeing their daily and strenuous efforts ... in generally positive terms, it will seem difficult and quite possibly perverse to be asking in what sense they are part of a system that generates inequalities” (p. 107).

Recognizing the ways in which I am complicit in reproducing and/or reinforcing the status quo is inherent to the goals for this study. James (2015) was right though; it is a very difficult thing to do.

Habitus Exposed

On a hot, summer afternoon, as I sipped on a craft beer and mingled with the parents of young party guests who shrieked with delight as they ran in endless succession through the host's sprinkler system, I overheard a monologue that nearly caused me to choke on my chèvre and organic pear-topped artisanal cracker. The speech came from an acquaintance whose social circle and mine intersect from time to time, like Venn diagrams ensconced within the common set of the university that anchors each of us to this city and occasionally necessitates overlap—usually at urbane children's parties of mutual friends and colleagues. "Meg," my acquaintance, was engaged in discussion with one of our shared friends who signalled me to join them. Meg was concerned about the quality of education at the public school her elementary school-aged daughters attend, as well as the safety and educational well-being of her (but framed as "our") children:

Meg: I want to support the public system but our local school is, well, you know the neighbourhood we're in is mixed and some of the kids who go there are pretty rough and don't exactly come from the best families. Now the house around the corner from ours is being turned into a rental property and I feel bad saying this, but you just know what's going to happen with that. There's already so much instability in some of those homes and then their kids are fighting when they get to school. It just ends up taking so much time and energy away from our kids.

I hate to say it, but I'm worried about the influence of some of those other kids. I can't blame the teachers though; most of them are doing their best. The class sizes are too big and they don't get enough resources or support. The parents are to blame, but still, it's our kids who are getting short-changed! I'm not unsympathetic, honestly. I get that in most families both parents have to work. But some of them just don't care about their children's education. No seriously, when I talk to the teachers, that's what they tell me. They just send their kids out the door every day and assume that it's all up to the teachers - not only to teach their kids, but to discipline and entertain them too! And some parents just don't get involved at all. Well, you know what? My husband and I both work. We're busy too, but we still make time to be involved and make sure our kids are doing their best in school. We're going to see how it goes this year, but we'll consider sending them to a private school if this doesn't work out."

Meg's description of some of the families in her mixed neighbourhood and the students at her children's local public school provided me with an unsettling glimpse into how my own working class family might have appeared to others when I was growing up, especially to educators who may have, intentionally or unconsciously, acted as gatekeepers. My recognition was a bit slow and momentarily distorted however, like when I am unaware that the shop window I am standing in front of is working as a hazy kind of mirror, and I think, "Now, who is that strange woman and why is she staring at me?"—before realizing it's me.

Once recognized however, I could see a reflection of my much younger self in Meg's words: "Those *other* kids"; my childhood homes in that dreaded "rental property"; and my mom and dad as those "parents who don't get involved at all." I understood that

for Meg strong parental involvement in children's' education, besides being a moral sticking point, also makes for good common sense. Lawler (2000) notes that in this era it is no longer the "ascriptive ties of birth" that are cited as holding individuals back from their ability to function and participate fully in society; "it is coming from 'chaotic' or 'deprived' families, which just happen to also be working class" (pp. 45-46). Moreover, in this place where university degrees and homeownership are taken for granted, not so much as markers of status, but normality, other ways of being that are intimately familiar to me may confer an identity of a less-than-ideal classmate, student, neighbour, family, et cetera.

When I was growing up I vacillated between trying to convince myself I was, and despairing that I would never be, part of a *normal* family. On the surface, at least, I suppose my family looked normal, it just never stuck. My four-person, nuclear family had the privilege of Whiteness and we shared in the mainstream Christian world-view, but we lacked some other key aspects necessary to fit the dominant definition of a normal family—namely economic, cultural, and linguistic capital. My immigrant parents strove to be good Canadian citizens, and they encouraged my younger brother and me to do the same. The messages I received at home were mostly about fitting in and cooperating, no matter where we were. The stern reminder, "*Doe eens normaal!*" was a common phrase used by our parents if they suspected we were doing anything to the contrary. Yet everything from our "*funny way of talking English*" (Ria transcript) to our subsidized rental housing, to our cars in their various states of disrepair parked haphazardly around our property, spoke of our difference, of something approximating but never quite reaching the gold standard I was always subconsciously grasping for—normal.

In his paper titled “On the Family as a Realized Category,” Bourdieu (1996) claimed that:

[T]he family in its legitimate definition is a privilege instituted into a universal norm: a de facto privilege that implies a symbolic privilege ... those who have the privilege of having a *normal family* are able to demand the same of everyone without having to raise the question of the conditions (e.g., a certain income, living space, etc.) of universal access to what they demand universally. (p. 23; emphasis added)

Growing up, I always asked the wrong thing: Why can’t we just be like other families? I never thought to challenge the “conditions of universal access” or raise the question of familial circumstances: geographical, historical, political, economic, or otherwise. Lately it seems, I can’t stop asking.

So, this is how it goes. Through the indirect gaze of “others” I discover not only the peculiarities of my own habitus; I also re-discover who I am and where I was meant to belong. Except I don’t. Where I sense my belonging today is neither here, among a well-established, highly educated middle class, nor is it back in my old working class life. Bourdieu claimed that the culture and practices of those who share a given field tend to be taken as self-evident among its members. Given that I share a specific, somewhat exclusive social field with Meg, and participate in many similar parenting practices, for example, volunteering at my son’s public elementary school whenever I can, and taking a seat on parent council, it is not unreasonable for her to assume that we come from similar backgrounds and are, therefore, likely to share a similar world view. However, as James (2015) argues, “practices that appear self-evidently good or ‘the way things are’ in an

educational setting might, from another perspective, show themselves to both respond to and reproduce structural inequalities” (pp. 107-108).

It is because I have crossed class borders, moving between “working class” and “working poor” for most of my life, then catapulting (at least this is how it has felt) into a space of unquestioned, taken-for-granted privilege, I want to stand up for those families with whom I undoubtedly share “affinities of the habitus” (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 58).

Whether I like it or not, I am in the process of becoming middle class so conversations like the one above leave me feeling pulled between two very different and competing subjectivities (Lucey, Melody, & Walkerdine, 2003).

I have a foot in both worlds, but I am often tempted to make quick moral judgements about practices that Meg and others “like her” take to be self-evident. What has been harder for me is to acknowledge the ways *I* am like her, and, to critically examine the ways I have responded to structural inequalities as a first-generation, middle class parent and student which so far has been to take advantage of every opportunity presented to me that I never had growing up, rationalizing my actions as simply trying to make life easier for my son. Trying to think through all of this messy business puts me face to face with the realization that I share in the responsibility of reproducing the same structural inequalities that held me back years ago, and that continue to hold back people I care about today. What to do?

There is no easy way out of these kinds of competing subjectivities for me. Unfortunately, the knowledge I have gained through my tuition-free education (one of the great advantages of having what Bourdieu (1990a, p. 4) would have identified as my “relation to power”) can’t save me now, for as James (2015) explains, “The *compass* of a

Bourdieuian analysis is not ... likely to lend itself to ‘reading off’ recipes for action” (p. 108; emphasis in original). What my education (which has enabled me to engage in a Bourdieusian analysis in the first place) *has* done, is allowed me to recognize that the normal family, among many other things I had long-ago presumed to understand, is a socially-constructed category that holds up only in relation to the dominant view, and is dependent on asymmetrical advantages and opportunities that are bestowed on some individuals and groups more so than others.

The knowledge I have gained by using a self-reflexive research approach enables me to respond to structures of inequality with greater self-awareness and with the confidence to use class consciousness as a guide as I raise my son and prepare myself for re-entry the work force. As a White, newly middle class, graduate school-educated woman who has lived through and is concerned about social inequality, I also recognize that others may see me as having power. However, I know that my power comes not from an ivory (or concrete) tower up above somewhere, but from a place much closer to the ground; it comes from the *roots* of my experience.

Linguistic Capital or Unrecognized Currency?

“There is of course, everything which belongs to the art of living, a wisdom taught by necessity, suffering and humiliation and deposited in an inherited language.”

~ Bourdieu (1984, p. 394)

As I mentioned earlier, I was born in a predominantly French-speaking, ethnically diverse, working class city called Vanier (which has long since been amalgamated with Ottawa), one year after my parents emigrated from the Netherlands. When they arrived in Canada, my parents spoke very little English. For this reason, my mother tongue is the one my parents used. *Plat*, as it is called, is a relatively obscure dialect used exclusively

in the southern, former coal-mining region of the Netherlands that border on Germany and Belgium. Due to proximity, Plat shares some of the vocabulary and linguistic characteristics of both German and French. My mom explains: *“It doesn’t even sound like Dutch, it sounds more like a German accent. ... It’s slang from the city where you lived, because just about every city in the province has its own kind of slang again. There is [sic] so many different ones.”* Very simply then, Plat is an everyday language spoken by ordinary (i.e., non-academic) people in the region my parents hailed from, which is why they spoke it too.

Wat Kan Ik Dromen?

Some of my earliest memories are about sleep times and how much I hated them because going to bed meant being separated from my parents. When I was very young my mom would stand in the doorway of my bedroom and say “Slap lekker”/ “Sleep well,” as she slowly pulled my door shut. I would try to stall her by asking the question above, which means, “What can I dream of”? This was a crucial part of my sleep routine since it replaced the more conventional practice of reading of a bedtime story and I wouldn’t go to sleep without it.

Occasionally, my dad would put me to bed. He would lie beside me and make up a story as I stared up at the spackled ceiling and imagined fantastical characters he had created in his imagination, just for me. Before he ever reached the ending of any of his made-up fairy tales though, his speech would begin to slow and his breathing would start to sputter into cacophonous snores. Story time always ended abruptly and noisily with my dad. It was no use asking him to pick up where he left off the next night because he never

remembered. My mom was much more reliable, “Dromen over het leven op een boerderij”/ “Dream about living on a farm” was her consistent reply.

Pulling out my best stalling tactics to delay the time between my mom (or dad) closing the door for the night and me being allowed to open it again in the early hours of the morning, I would ask about the kinds of animals we might have on our future homestead: Een paard? (A horse)? Een koe? (A cow)? Een beer? (A bear)? Een hart? (A deer)? I would have never seen any of these creatures grazing on the tiny patch of grass we called “the front yard” in the subsidized row house we rented in the small, industrial city where we lived. My mom’s reply was comforting in its predictability: “Ja, ja” to the horse and the cow; a firm “Nee!” to the bear. The deer, for some reason, was always negotiable.

When I was very young, preschool aged, I thought it was normal to speak a language other than English at home, since this is how it worked in my family and in the homes of many of my parents’ earliest Canadian friends, most of whom were immigrants like themselves. When we were out in the neighbourhood, my parents spoke in their “broken English”, and I usually hid behind their legs if anyone tried to talk to me. But, within the private cocoon of our home we spoke “*our funny kind of Dutch*” as my mom describes the dialect that she and my dad grew up with and passed down to me.

Thus, Plat is not just an obscure minority language, it is an obscure minority language distinguished by linguistic characteristics typical of working class culture. These include speaking plainly—even bluntly; speaking loudly or unselfconsciously; relying on context rather than elaborate speech; grimacing and gesticulating (“talking with hands and feet,” as say at home). However, these characteristics are only notable in

relation to the style of communication apparently favoured by the middle class. Amongst ourselves, we don't take notice of them.

Bourdieu (1991) described the *linguistic habitus* as a sub-set of an internalized class disposition that individuals acquire as they learn to speak in their home environment. Inscribed in the body and manifest as capital, embodied linguistic capital reveals an individual's level of familiarity with the norms of dominant culture accents and speech patterns. In this way, differences in linguistic style, such as accent, intonation, inflection, articulation, and other mannerisms that characterize a speaker's communication, signify their social status, as well as their ethnic and cultural variance from the dominant culture. As my dad explains, "*We all learned Dutch in school, but we speak Dutch with a fairly heavy accent.*" According to Bourdieu (1991):

In order for one mode of expression among others (a particular language in the case of bilingualism, a particular use of language in the case of a society divided into classes) to impose itself as the only legitimate one, the linguistic market has to be unified and the different dialects (of class, region or ethnic group) have to be measured practically against the legitimate language or usage. (p. 45)

When it comes to linguistic capital, you could say I have been twice blessed. Given that my "mode of expression" consists of a working class linguistic style interwoven with an ethnic minority language, the discrepancy between my embodied linguistic capital, or my linguistic habitus, and the dominant language and culture of school (especially at university) doesn't come naturally to me. Perhaps it's not surprising that language holds a central place in my memories. For as long as I have been in school I have been made to question my ability to use it correctly. Being a Canadian-born, English

language learner (ELL) presented some early challenges for me when I started school, but even long after I had mastered conversational English, admonishments from teachers over my “creative” language use and word choices let me know that my skills in this area were still lacking. To this end, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argued that:

The influence of linguistic capital, particularly manifest in the first years of schooling when the understanding and use of language are the major points of leverage for teachers’ assessments, never ceases to be felt: style is always taken into account, implicitly or explicitly at every level of the education system. (p. 73)

I learned to pay close attention to my teachers and classmates while avoiding more active forms of participation such as getting involved in class discussions or volunteering answers. I was worried about sounding stupid and this is still a concern for me today.

This is why I prefer to learn with my mouth shut.

When I started kindergarten in the basement of a Lutheran Church located in a hamlet of approximately 600, predominantly White, first and second-generation immigrants of mixed European backgrounds, my family had moved five times, once for each year of my life. At that time, we still spoke Plat exclusively at home. When we left our house, I spoke English, but reluctantly; I was, after all, “*a very shy kid*” (Ria transcript).

Primary Education

Sitting on the front steps, the backs of my short-clad legs burning on the rough concrete, I muse about our new “bungalow”, as my mom calls it. It’s a funny word that’s fun to say. The bungalow is the first real house I have ever lived in. More spacious than

the apartment suites and row houses we lived in before, the bungalow has a proper front and back yard, a garage and even a garden. My new town is nice too; it has a German name that makes me feel at home. Our new house and my imminent entry into kindergarten in the fall aren't the only big news though. My mom is expecting a baby. Hopefully it will be a girl so I'll have someone to play with. For now, all I want to do is to play inside with the empty moving boxes and listen to my mom trying to speak English to the woman who came over to introduce herself when she spotted Mom hanging our laundry in the back yard. Only I can't. My mom invited the lady in for cake and coffee, and I must stay outside for at least an hour. That's "The Rule"—every day comes with at least one hour of fresh air, "rain or shine," my mom always says. I hate that rule.

All at once I hear a noise that sounds like it comes from something wild and possibly very hungry. It takes me a few panicked seconds and then I see the cause of my alarm. It's a big group of kids of all different ages (I guess by their varying sizes) running towards me, screaming and yelling from across the alleyway. I break the rule and run into the house, my heart pounding as the screen door slams shut behind me. My unceremonious entry catches my mom's attention and she marches over, unimpeded by her large belly, demanding to know, "Waarom ben je niet buiten spelen met de kinderen? I look at her pleadingly, "Are you crazy?" I want to say, but I wouldn't dare. Why can't she see how dangerous it is out there all alone? Those kids will eat me alive! Feigning illness, I beg her, in Plat, so my mom's visitor won't know that I'm scared, to let me to stay indoors, just this once. But my mom turns me around and gives me a firm shove towards the door where a bunch of small, grubby hands and faces press against the screen to stare at me, eyes wide with curiosity.

Many of my future classmates had been part of the “danger” I sensed on my front step that first day we moved. In our interview, my mom suggested that my fear of meeting and joining in with new kids might have been caused by my limited English-speaking abilities.

Ria: *You were a very shy kid. I had to push you out of the door to go and play with other kids. I almost had to force you to go out of the door. I don't know if it was because you, because we always talked our slang to you, you know, and maybe you felt awkward that you didn't know enough English either. It must have been awfully tough for you when you started going to kindergarten, that you, that you didn't know the language very well. Can you remember that?*

Oddly, my memories of shyness don't include any “awkward” feelings about my lack of English speaking abilities. I just *preferred* to speak in my home language, at least this is what I had always believed. But my mom's hypothesis may be the more accurate. According to Bourdieu (1991) the linguistic habitus always implies:

a certain propensity to speak and to say determinate things (the expressive interest) and a certain *capacity* to speak, which involves both the linguistic capacity to generate an infinite number of grammatically correct discourses, and the social capacity to use this competence adequately in a determinate situation.
(p. 37; emphasis added)

My shyness did not seem to hamper my social life, as my dad recalls, “*You were pretty good friends with the [neighbour's] kids. [They] would come over and [they] never spoke anything else than English.*” From the first day of school, I had a group of friends to walk

with to the little church at the end of my street, and home again, with nary a care or an anxious parent behind us.

In hindsight, there were many signs indicating that I was still in the early and (mostly) nonverbal period of English language learning when I started kindergarten. At this stage, young learners listen and accumulate knowledge but are often hesitant to speak their new language, instead using gestures to communicate, or spending time rehearsing new words and phrases quietly to themselves (Paradis, Kirova, & Dachyshyn, 2009). During the first parent–teacher interview my kindergarten teacher instructed my parents to speak to me only in English because my language development was, apparently, delayed. Unfortunately, there were no supports for English language learners (ELL) at my school or in the community. As Paradis et al. (2009) maintain, the quality and quantity of English language exposure affects its acquisition, so although my parents wanted to comply with my teacher, this intervention was far from ideal since neither of them had mastered English themselves. My dad recalls, “*That [speaking only English at home] didn’t work so good. That is easier said than done, let us say.*”

Examining the relationship between English language acquisition and social class, Haynes (2007) found that class differences influence how quickly students can demonstrate their new language skills. Like North American, urban, middle class parents, immigrant middle class parents in urban centres tended to speak frequently to their children, teach them verbally and give oral instructions to even their youngest children. Contrastingly, immigrant parents from lower social backgrounds were more found to teach through demonstration and verbalized their instructions much less frequently. Likewise, Paradis et al. (2009) report, “Children from newcomer families where the

parents have post-secondary education tend to learn English faster because these parents often have higher language and literacy skills in their home language” (p. 4).

What their research implies is that for children of immigrants whose parents have high school education or less, mastering academic English—a process that has been found to take anywhere from 5 to 7 years, depending on the level of mastery in the first language (Paradis et al, 2009)—is much more difficult because their parents have not had the opportunity to acquire higher language and literacy skills in their home language, let alone in English. In these families, modelling, reinforcing, or being able to personally assist their children with the academic instructional language of the school is nearly always an impossibility. It is usually the child, the emergent English language learner, who models academic language for her/his parents and other family members.

Since there was no extra support for ELLs in my school or in our community, my memories of early English learning were based on my faulty assumption that it was taught to me by my parents. But they recalled that it was *me* who initiated the use of English language at home, that it was my friends and I who modelled the English language for *them*:

Ria: *You started going to school, and I think when you started bring home some friends, you know, and they talked only English to us and we had to talk English to them, and of course to you too then.*

Jacques: *You were the one, when you brought your friends over... you were the biggest influence that we actually, that all of a sudden we didn't speak no more [Plat] to each other. ... And yeah, because them kids came over, it didn't take long and Sandra didn't speak no more Plat. All she did was English with the kids.*

My immersion into English-speaking culture at school, while ceasing communication in my first language, helped to ensure that my vocabulary and pronunciation skills would soon catch up to those of my classmates. However, it also led to the loss of connection to extended family in the Netherlands. “First language attrition,” or never completely acquiring or mastering the first language before learning a second, meant that my skills in Plat stagnated with my participation in an English-speaking elementary school (Paradis, et al., 2009). Eventually, phone calls to my grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, which were once events I looked forward to, became awkward and difficult to sustain.

Eventually I found that I could not communicate as effectively in Plat as I once had, and I even began having trouble understanding it if it was spoken too quickly. My parent’s insistence that it would “all come back to me” only made me feel worse. The development of my first language had stopped and was frozen somewhere in the mid-70s, trapped with the skill level of a 6-year old. My Dutch cousins, who were beginning to learn English, laughed at my efforts to keep conversing in Plat, one of them even saying to me (in English), “You talk like an Indian,” presumably meaning that my language sounded halting and awkward, like the stereotypes of Indigenous people seen on television. She was teasing me, but after that I became too self-conscious of how I sounded when speaking in Plat. From then on I usually let my cousins speak English to me, which most of them seemed to prefer. Paradis et al. (2009) observe:

Family relationships can weaken if children and parents do not share a common language of communication. If children have limited proficiency in their first language and the parents have limited proficiency in English, the communication

of values, beliefs, advice, family stories and other cultural and familial understandings can be compromised. As well, the loss of the home language may cause a child's self-esteem to suffer because the child may feel he or she does not belong to the home culture without the language. At the same time, these children may also feel that they do not fully belong to the majority culture. (p. 6)

I am sure no one could have predicted that I would develop a sense of being “culturally homeless,” of “being torn between two worlds” and that this feeling would widen throughout my development and into adulthood where it would be intersected by class mobility as well (Friedman, 2015, p. 15).

Although my first language was not recognized at school, I maintain that it held a certain cultural cachet within our working class and largely Germanic community. In my earliest years, when language still had a fluid quality for me, resisting clearly defined categories, but instead flowing easily from one into another, I understood English, Dutch, some French and a fair amount of German, much to the surprise of some of our neighbours who seemed delighted to hear a small Canadian girl responding to their German folk sayings in Plat.

As Bourdieu (1991) explained, the relationship between the linguistic habitus and the linguistic market is where articulatory style is assessed and assigned a value that may be exchanged for other types of capital. The linguistic capital we brought with us to this little prairie hamlet was recognized and valued and it enabled my parents to increase their *social capital*, which was converted into *symbolic capital* which, in turn, facilitated the accumulation of a modest amount of *economic capital*. The narrative that follows

provides a glimpse into this stage of my familial trajectory, which informed the type of capital I brought to school with me.

What It's Like for a Girl

My parents purchased the old, single-engine fire station, close to “downtown,” which was just a euphemism for the most used gravel road in the hamlet. They had the weathered, wooden boards sprayed with beige and white stucco, turning it into an auto body shop for my dad. A big professional sign hung high above the doorway, announcing it as an important place of business. Once, at school when the teacher asked everyone to explain what their parents do, I told the class that my dad was a “body man” with his very own shop, and that my mom was a “housewife,” since that was how I had heard her describe herself. I was very proud when I shared this information with my teacher and classmates. On the days when my mom went to her house-cleaning job (apparently she was cheating on our house and was married to another house as well) I would go to my dad’s shop after school. There, I would wait for him to finish work and we would drive home together in time for supper, often in the car my dad was working on at the time. It might be roof-less, door-less, covered in dull grey primer, missing a windshield or a passenger seat. Our short drive home was always an adventure.

The shop was a man’s place. Calendars with pictures of beautiful women in short-shorts and high heeled shoes suggestively cradling drills and screw drivers to their breasts, or leaning bikini-clad over the hood of a classic car, decorate the walls. These were generously supplied by tool reps who came around a few times a year to see if my dad needed new equipment. Cases of empty beer bottles, mostly Pilsner and Extra Old Stock, lined the back wall of the “office.” A stack of dusty shop manuals and dog-eared

Playboy magazines were stacked haphazardly on the back of the toilet. But it was classical music or the world news on the CBC that usually crackled out of the dusty clock radio that was never set to the right time.

The shop was also full of smells - metal, rubber, motor oil, sweat. I liked hanging out there when it was only the two of us, just my dad and me. On those days, I spent my time cleaning up and organizing the empties, looking for spare change under the car mats and in between the seats, or, if there was room on the shop floor, scooting around on the creeper, pretending to go for a drive in the country, like my family did most Sunday afternoons. Other days, when the shop was filled with men who distracted my dad from his work in ways I knew my mom would never approve of, I would make myself as inconspicuous as possible.

They usually came on Friday and Saturday afternoons, with cases of beer and cigarettes, including those skunky-smelling ones, and they kept my dad company while he worked. On those days, it was always bands like Pink Floyd, Aerosmith, and the Rolling Stones on the radio. I knew my place and stayed out of the way. I could always find a writing instrument somewhere among the dozens of dried out and heat-exploded pens my dad kept in a purple Crown Royal bag on the counter. Sitting high atop the cracked, red, vinyl stool, I drew pictures and wrote little poems on the pages of a large, out-dated desk calendar. The paper was such good quality, so thick and white. When I flipped the pages over to draw on the back sides I could barely even make out the cartoon on the front: a child in baggy overalls standing guiltily in front of a shattered window, with this caption below: "God bless all little boys with sling shots!"

During the data collection phase of this study, memories of hanging out in my dad's shop kept circling around in my head, like birds trapped in a room, frantically looking for escape, so I wrote this down, not exactly sure of what to do with it after that. In fact, it is only one of many kinds of ordinary activities I could have chosen to share. I could have, for example, included a story about our Sunday road trips. How for years, even well into my teens, my parents would insist on taking my brother and me for a "drive," picking up anyone along the way who was looking to hitch a ride. After he and I stopped fighting about where that all-important invisible line was that divided his space from mine, most of our time in the car was spent in individual reverie, an uncommonly easy silence between the four of us punctuated briefly from time to time, by short episodes of reminiscing and story-telling. We might cover upwards of 800 kilometers in a single day, round-trip, and sometimes arrived home in the middle of the night, but no matter how late, on Monday morning we were at school, on time - our parents always made sure of it.

We drove through Indian reserves and Hutterite colonies, we stopped to drink water at every waterfall heading into the Rocky Mountains, and we ate eggrolls and gelatinous slices of cherry pie at Chinese-Canadian diners in countless, nameless prairie towns. My parents never seemed to have a purpose or destination in mind for our adventures; these trips were undertaken for the *experience* of seeing the county and meeting new people. Because of these experiences, I feel comfortable around strangers from many walks of life, having long ago lost track of the number of "guests" with whom I have shared the back seat of my parent's car. And, to this day, when I am driving

anywhere, I still see the world beyond my windshield with wonder, as if through a tourist's, or new immigrant's, eyes.

Likewise, I could have written about the formality of supper time, when our four-person kitchen/dining table was properly set at 6:00 p.m. sharp, no television or any other distractions allowed. Homemade soup always started the meal, followed by more western European fare: well-done meat, boiled or fried potatoes, sauce, boiled vegetable, apple sauce, and of course, dessert, which my mom would have prepared along with the soup earlier that day. The fact that she prepared a hot, three course meal from scratch every day, in addition to managing every other aspect of our household with the precision of a ship's captain, *and* cleaned house for another woman down the street was lost on me until I began "fact checking" for this study. The thing was, I remembered spending a lot of time in my dad's shop, but I couldn't work out why since I had always believed my mom was *only* a housewife when I was in elementary school.

After revisiting our old rented bungalow with her, I realized that my mom had so thoroughly mastered the skills she had learned in *Huishoudsschool*, that I had always taken her work for granted. She was, and still is, the master of all things domestic, from baking and budgeting to washing windows and waxing floors. Now that I am a mother, and there are days I barely manage to crank out a couple of grilled cheese sandwiches after spending a gruelling day in the library with my laptop (I blame my carpal tunnel syndrome; it makes it so hard to use the flipper) my admiration for my mom's skill and expertise has grown substantially. But to get back on topic, I chose to include the narrative about my dad's shop because it so effectively evokes, for me, many of the sensory perceptions and early cognitions of my girlhood, which, in addition to all the

other bits of background information I tried to sneak into the discussion, informed my social reality and thus, the kinds of capital I had available to bring to school with me.

Wacquant (2013) explains that the “mundane activities of sense-making” can only be produced from one’s position in the “objective space of constraints and facilitations and with the cognitive tools” available to them there (p. 4). Accordingly,

These constructions are not effected in a social vacuum. ... The position occupied in social space, that is, in the structure of the distribution of the different species of capital, which are also weapons, governs the representations of this space and the stances adopted in the struggles to conserve or transform it (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 28, as cited in Wacquant, 2013, p. 4)

The “species of capital” I acquired through the ordinary activities of my family life are valuable to me, but they did not turn out to be great weapons, especially at school; and by the time I entered high school, I was mostly trying to transform the representations of my social space and my position within it. During the earliest years of my education however, I maintain that the capital I brought to school *was* acknowledged and I benefitted greatly from this. Report cards for my first three years of elementary school are a testament to my adaptation to the norms of Canadian school culture, including the dominant English language, and my acceptance at school:

Report 1, Grade 1: *Sandra is doing very well in Grade one. She is progressing in, and seems to really enjoy, reading. She sometimes shows some timidity... in playing some games in physical education. However, she is a good “sport”, and is overcoming this timidity steadily. Sandra is a very likeable girl and it is a real pleasure to have her in the classroom.*

Report 2, Grade 1: *Sandra is doing well in school. She joins into class and group discussions as well as active games with much less shyness.*

By Grades 2 and 3, I was excelling in school. My marks for Reading, Language Arts, Arithmetic and Spelling were mostly A's, with only a few B+'s. My sense of self-efficacy continued to develop as I received recognition for other small accomplishments at school as well. For example, in Grade 1, after being assigned a small part as a lost baby duck in a play, I discovered a hidden talent for sophisticated comedy, earning applause and laughter of my teacher and classmates. In Grade 2, an inspired interpretation of Canada's food pyramid (circa 1977) won me a mason jar full of jelly beans in a poster contest promoting healthy eating habits. In similar ironic fashion, a poem I wrote about the specialness of snowflakes when I was in Grade 3 was selected for print in the local *Gazette*. Years later, in Grade 7, my French teacher banged his fist on my desk with excitement over my perfectly rolling "r"; his own "r" hindered, presumably, by his thick Ukrainian accent as he shouted enthusiastically, "Now, *she speaks French!*" In fact, I don't speak French, at least not very well. But because my tongue remembers how to form the "r," (among other "foreign" sounds) I can, apparently, pronounce it quite well.

The skills and knowledge I brought with me from my home environment were very much like some of those Yosso (2005) describes when she uses critical race theory to explain the unique but largely unrecognized forms of *linguistic capital*, or "the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style," that Students of Color bring with them into the urban classroom setting (p. 70). Among them, she lists the ability to communicate through art, music or poetry, as well as engage in storytelling, listening to and recounting oral

histories, as skills that reflect these students' multiple language and communication abilities. Storytelling, a vital aspect of communication in my family, yet one that I had always taken for granted as "just talking," relies on a skill set that consists of "memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

Yosso (2005) suggests that the skills and knowledge possessed by Students of Color are often not recognized within the dominant (i.e., White, middle class) culture of the urban school. Understanding what I do today about White privilege, I have no doubt that my being a White student has served me well at school, but it is only in relation to the "other" that being White is a valued commodity. In other words, being a White girl in an all-White school was of no advantage to me. There was something more that accounts for my early school success, and here the relational aspect of Bourdieu's theory helps to explain it. I believe I thrived in this little school in my German hamlet because my family had more than an adequate supply of valued capital in all its forms, which bolstered my early educational experiences.

Recognized and valued linguistic capital was converted into *social capital* and then into *symbolic capital*, which my family began to accumulate as well. While my mom volunteered with the Catholic Women's League, my dad became involved in the community as a small business owner, a volunteer firefighter and the president of the local chapter of the Lions Club. He was even asked to run for mayor, but he declined. Among the social networks my parents created, I credit the ones that were most important to my early school success as my best friend's aunt, who was my Grade 1 teacher; my second-grade teacher, who lived across the back alley from my house and always let us

kids into her back yard to pick sweet peas; and the principal of my school who was a member of the Lion's Club where my dad was president. Additionally, as my dad became an established small business man, our family began to gain in *economic capital*.

Life was good. Like most children, I imagine, I took my social world for granted. I had all the advantages of growing up in an upwardly-mobile, working class family in a close-knit and supportive community. My school's culture and my family/personal life were well-matched, so I learned "naturally" what it means to be "a fish in water." I could have never known that it would be decades later, when I was participating in a teaching assistant program at community college, that I would experience this feeling in an educational setting again.

Rurality

The sign in front of my old rural elementary school announces its name, along with a bold, optimistic motto emblazed at the bottom: "Preparing Students for Life!" The sign makes a confident statement about the school's ability to shape generations of productive citizens. Its message is future-oriented and holds the promise of unlimited possibility through education. Education is not just *a* means to a successful life course; it is *the* means for success, productivity and well-being. The message fits perfectly with the ideology of meritocracy, the belief that anyone who has ability and the willingness to work hard will reap the benefits of their virtues, and those who don't, won't. Understood in this way, education really is "the great equalizer"—a leveler for all those who have been held back by poverty, race, gender, or any other circumstances over which they have no control. What the sign in front of my old school fails to tell however, is what *kind* of life students in this small agricultural community are being prepared for.

Memory Lane

I am taking a geographical trip down “memory lane” during what is supposed to be my last term of graduate school, but won’t be. My mom is my companion. Driving along the kind of street you might find yourself lost on in a desolate industrial park, I see the rural elementary school I attended from Grade 4 through Grade 6 on the east side of the road; the junior high and high school where I was a student from Grade 7 through Grade 10 is across the street, to my left. School will be starting again in less than a week, yet there are few signs to suggest that any preparations are being made. I put the car in neutral in the empty school parking lot and take a picture for posterity. The camera “clicks.”

“Suhn-drrha, you are going to be late!” my mom shouted from the bottom of the stairs. It was my first day at my new school and I was anxious about everything. For one thing, I always used to walk to school; now I had to take a bus. Getting on was no problem, but what if I got on the wrong one at the end of the day? Or, what if I didn’t make any friends? My biggest worry though, was being mistaken for a boy. It had happened before. With my freckled face, large front teeth, and white, poker-straight, short hair cut into a kind of crooked helmet (thanks to my mom’s handy scissor work), I knew I didn’t exactly look like a princess. I was sure it was my short hair that always caused me grief. Since I lacked this recognizable feature of femininity and was a good half decade away from acquiring any others, I thought long and hard about how to dress for the first day at my new school. I needed a power suit - one that would bring out my feminine features, but in a way that made it look like I didn’t have to try too hard. A tall

order indeed. The ruffle-necked plaid dress with lacy cuffs mom suggested the night before was definitely out.

“Suhn-drrha!” my mom hollered again, now sounding dangerously impatient, “Don’t make me come upstairs and get you!” There is a good reason my brother and I refer to her “the fastest backhand in the west” so I quickly pulled on a pair of khaki-coloured gauchos and a baby blue t-shirt with “The Bee Gees” embellished on the chest in glitter paint. Both items were hand-me-downs from my older, fashion-conscious cousin in the Netherlands. That was it! I would dazzle my new classmates with my style. I completed the look with a pair of matching blue pom-pom ankle socks and flat, cotton Chinese shoes purchased from the SAAN store the week before. A quick check in the mirror assured me that I was looking good. Once downstairs, my mom thrust a bag into my hands and I ran out the door to catch the bus.

Sometimes even the best laid plans go awry and seeing how this one barely met the criteria of a “plan,” it may not be too surprising that this was one of those times. First, the dreaded question was asked. It came from the “popular girl” of course—a blonde, feather-haired beauty, only seconds after my fourth-grade teacher introduced me to the class. This was followed by several sniggers as my new classmates eyed me up from their Wrangler-filled desk chairs throughout the rest of the morning. I hoped lunch time might be better but when I pulled out the contents of my brown paper bag—the only one among a crowd that seemed to favour cartoon-charactered lunch kits—my “Hagelslag” sandwich provided another source of curiosity. Howls of “Eeww, she’s eating mouse turds on her sandwich!” let me know that I was definitely not fitting in. I

longed to be back with my old friends, in my old school, and to be able to walk home at lunchtime and eat chocolate sprinkles on my bread without comment.

Later in the afternoon, as I stood at the far end of the long counter of bathroom sinks, taking respite from the burden of being the new kid, an older girl walked in. With a look I can only describe as anticipated good fortune mixed with suspicion, she headed towards me and said slyly, “You’re new here, aren’t you?” I nodded, glancing nervously at the door. After several seconds of scornful, quiet appraisal she broke the silence with a single command, “Gimme a smoke.”

“Oh um, I don’t smoke” I stammered, hoping to sound like I said that to people all the time. More silence and a long stare followed. “Yeah, well you’ll want to make sure you have one for me the next time I run into you” she said finally, before slinking out the door and somehow disappearing into an empty hallway. I hustled back to the relative safety of my classroom. In the weeks and months that followed, I would see her sometimes, at recess or during lunch hour, hanging around the tire park alone. She never spoke to me again.

I turn to my mom and remark that the school has been remodeled since I attended it decades ago, and recently too, it appears. The most noticeable change is the addition of a small playground. It is an upgrade from the lonely, ball-less tether ball pole and the over-sized tractor tires that served as climbers for the youngest students, and as hiding places for me and my friends as we sat squashed ourselves inside them: two on one side, two on the other, sheltered from the wind and our teachers’ eyes. There, inside the tar-blackened walls of a John Deere tire is where I smoked my first cigarette, stolen from the purse of a friend’s mother and shared between four 11-year-old girls in Grade 6, as we

celebrated the end of elementary school and prepared ourselves for junior high.

Before I started fourth grade, my family had moved again. The opportunity to rent, very cheaply, an old turn-of the-century, clap board farm house with a bit of land and a large garden was too good to pass up. While I was excited about the prospect of living on a farm, I hated leaving my friends, the bungalow and my old school behind. Nevertheless, we would spend the next eight of my formative years in a completely rural setting, far from amenities and the kinds of cultural and social experiences I would begin to crave before I had even reached adolescence. I wish I could explain what I still barely understand—what it means to come of age in a place it seems I had always wanted to leave.

Although we moved less than 10 kilometres outside of our hamlet, we were just far enough from my school’s catchment area that I had to be enrolled at another school in the same county but in a rival township. With its population of approximately 1,200 mostly Ukrainian descendants, the tight-knit agricultural community where my new school was located seemed as far away as the moon. Many of my classmate’s families ran large, successful farms and could (and did) rightfully boast that their great-great-grandparents settled the land they and their families lived on. They were steeped in the culture of their Ukrainian ancestors, not only through agriculture, but also through various traditions and customs around food, language and observations of religious holidays on the Julian calendar.

Unlike most rural areas across Canada, where students are more likely than their urban counterparts to come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Corbett, 2014), this one was, and still is, relatively well-off, reported to have a “lower proportion of families

with an after-tax low-income level ... compared to Alberta, [with a ratio of] 7.5% vs. 10.7%” (Alberta Health, 2015, p. iii). However, differences in socio-economic and social status are often represented subtly in rural communities like the one I grew up in, which was economically “rich” but educationally underprivileged. Lacking access to cultural spaces and consumer products that signify status obscures these differences even further, yet it was here in a community even more homogeneous than my last, that I began to feel the some of the nuances of my “difference,” especially as they pertained to rurality, religion, and ethnicity—for example, living on a farm, but not coming from a farming background; following Christian religious customs, but Catholic, not Orthodox; and my European heritage, Dutch (western), rather than Ukrainian (eastern)—were all sources of difference that marked my outsider, subordinate status. Much of the cultural capital that had served me so well at my old school, was unrecognized here.

Many of my school memories from this period are of a mean-spirited place, hostile towards outsiders. It was a place where sensitivity and emotionality were invitations for bullies and I had witnessed the aggressive tormenting of others, but for reasons I could never fully discern, I always managed to escape relatively unscathed. Once, in Grade 5 when our teacher asked the class to share one of our Christmas family traditions, a classmate interrupted my turn to call me a “*French frog*” and then told me to “*Go back to Quebec or wherever it is you come from.*” Our teacher ignored the incident and simply moved onto the next student. While I comforted myself with the knowledge that I was better in geography than my classmate, I wondered if the rest of them also felt such hostility towards Quebecers, and if so, why?

A far more poignant memory is of a Black substitute teacher, “Mr. Wells,” (the

only non-White teacher I had until I entered university), who came to our school near the end of Grade 6 as a replacement for the replacement teacher who replaced the teacher who had gone on stress leave. In other words, he was our third teacher that year. After nearly two weeks of tolerating racial slurs from a student, he lost his temper, picked up a chair and threw it across the room. As a child, it was a terrifying scene, watching an adult authority figure losing temporary but complete control, though not as disturbing as the cool efficiency with which the whole incident was erased. The next day our school principal simply took his turn at being our homeroom teacher. We never saw Mr. Wells again and no one spoke of him. I am certain nothing happened to the school bully who instigated the incident - an 11-year-old boy from an influential farming family - since he was in class the next day, as smug and mean as he ever was. In her study of teacher's experiences at rural prairie schools, Preston (2012) notes that there sometimes exists an "intangible subculture, which endorse[s] the existence and propagation of a racially- and culturally-homogenous community population" (p. 46). At my school, I would have say that the sub-culture was pretty tangible most of the time.

That incident was extreme; pettier insults happened with regularity and often seemed to be motivated by little more than small town rivalries, as Bourdieu (1984) suggests in this passage: "To account more fully for the differences in life-style between the different factions—especially as regards culture—one would have to take account of their distribution in a *socially ranked geographical space* (p. 124, original emphasis). My dad explained that the inhabitants of our old hamlet had always "*wanted to get away*," politically speaking, from the larger neighbouring town and namesake of the county we lived in, where I was now attending school. According to him, the general feeling of

people in our hamlet was “*that we get the short end of the stick. [The town] gets it all, and we get nothing. It’s always a bit of a rivalry.*”

Small town politics and competition for limited resources between rural municipalities can play out in subtle and not-so subtle ways among even the youngest and least political of inhabitants. Since my old school only went up to Grade 6, students had to be bussed to the larger town’s school for junior and senior high. I got a head start, but when my old classmates joined me three years later, I was still known as “the new girl.” Meanwhile, I witnessed my old friends from the hamlet confronting the same kinds of petty, though perhaps not always intentional, prejudices of teachers and students that I and only a handful of other newcomers, had confronted earlier.

It took me years to acculturate to my new environment. Actually, I don’t think I ever really did. At home, I didn’t complain too much; I knew my parents expected me to fit in. To get by, I became a social chameleon, turning potential enemies into allies. A few even became irreplaceable friends. Eventually, I could fit in, at least to some degree, with every social clique at school: the popular girls liked me because I posed no real threat to their status; the stoners liked me because I didn’t think I was too good to hang out with them, and besides, they didn’t have to share their drugs with me. The smart kids liked me because I was a responsible and cooperative partner; and the loners and outcasts liked me because I was a quiet ally who willingly did partner work with anyone who didn’t get picked. Socially, my transition into my new school appeared unproblematic to my parents and teachers. A comment on my Grade 4 report card plainly states, “*Sandra has adjusted very well to her new school.*”

Academically, a more complicated story was taking shape. My grades in Language

Arts and Arithmetic remained at the A and B grade levels throughout the year, but for the first time, I started getting C's on my report cards, in Science and Spelling, and even a C- in Social Studies. By Grade 6, curt comments from my principal state: "*Sandra is starting to neglect assignments*" (second term), and "*Sandra still neglects too many assignments*" (third term), so maybe I wasn't quite as well-adjusted as I was letting on.

Although we were not a farming family, rural life had a big impact on me; I wanted to become a veterinarian. Specifically, I wanted to have a large animal practice, like my childhood hero, James Herriot, the country vet in the book (and BBC series) *All Creatures Great and Small*, which I had read countless times since my parents had given it to me as a Christmas gift. Most of the adults in my life seemed impressed by my aspiration, though I was neither encouraged nor discouraged to pursue it. At home, no one talked about the money, time and concerted effort it would take for me to reach my goal.

Like many country schools, mine was marked by "the marginal status of the rural" (Corbett, 2014, p. 1) and was somewhat disadvantaged in relation to larger and better resourced urban schools. Our teachers never made us aware of the implications of rurality for young minds that have the audacity to want greater things than our marginal status would support. Dreams for a future that extended beyond the agricultural community and raising a family, that pushed against classed and gendered norms, that extended into the unknown realm of university, like the dreams of a young girl who wanted a career as livestock veterinarian, often remained just that—dreams. They rarely turned into plans.

The situation I have described was not unique to the rural school I attended, or to rural schools in Alberta. Studies show that students from rural areas are underrepresented

in universities across Canada. For example, the SSCSAST reports that, “A student who attended a rural high school is 20.1 percentage points less likely to attend university [than students who attended urban schools]” (Finnie et al., 2011, p. 24).

Unfortunately, there are many reasons why the concept of “rurality” is widely perceived as “education’s other” (Corbett, 2014, p. 5). In addition to numerous well-documented challenges facing rural schools across Canada, including: distance from PSE institutions, financial restraints, distance from urban cultural resources and activities, aging school infrastructures, fewer classroom resources, limited support services and difficulty attracting qualified teachers to rural communities (Preston, 2012); important micro-level factors may also have a negative effect on students’ aspirations and level of participation, including “membership in a lower income household or not having a family history of PSE” which tends to compound the challenges mentioned above. (Finnie et al., 2011, p. 24). Not surprisingly, these conditions rarely support a culture of high educational expectations or aspirations, in which planning for the future includes participating in university.

Obviously, there are exceptions and many potential advantages to rural education, as demonstrated by my first experience at a rural school, such as small class sizes and close personal relationships with teachers, parents, and community members (Preston, 2012). For me however, the conditions in which I attended my second rural school, which set me apart and marked me as an outsider and as the perpetual “new girl,” were not personally advantageous to the development of an “educated habitus”—a disposition that requires “aspiration, [positive] academic self-concept and perception of schooling” (Nash, 2002, p. 27).

A Science Lesson

“Sandra, start us off at Chapter Three” my Grade 6 science teacher, “Mr. Pirsky” says.

“All of it?” I ask, as a familiar rush of heat spreads from my cheeks to my neck and creeps down the front of my chest. I begin to open my beat-up science text book to the appropriate page and try to act like I don’t notice that I am turning as red as a tomato.

“No, I’ll tell you when to stop”, Mr. Pirsky assures me. Once the butterflies settle in my stomach and my body temperature returns to normal, I find a comfortable pace and rhythm in the words. I am a good reader, and besides, everyone knows that if you read out loud you’re off the hook for answering questions later. I begin the chapter on “Wetlands” and notice that there are a lot of words I haven’t seen before. Still, I manage without stumbling: “ecosystems,” “adaptations,” “decomposers,” “biotic and abiotic,” and...

“Orgasms live in habitats that are specific to their species” I begin quietly. No one pays attention to my mispronunciation; as usual, no one in class is paying attention to anything. Not even Mr. Pirsky interrupts me as I continue reading the paragraphs, repeating my mistake again and again: “All living orgasms need food, light, space and shelter to survive. Orgasms that produce their own food are called producers. Abiotic factors affect orgasm survival,” and so on until I reach the end of the section. I look up expectantly, to see if I am to be relieved from reading duty or if I should continue. I am surprised to see a bemused expression on my teacher’s face, his eyes seem to be piercing through me.

“Do you know what an orgasm is?” Mr. Pirsky asks me after a long silence. A panic alarm goes off somewhere inside my head but I don’t know why. I am confused, and it appears that the rest of the class, who are suddenly attentive, is confused as well. My heart races and my mind struggles to make sense of the question while my eyes scour the page I have just finished reading. Then I see it, right there in front of me in black and white: Orgasm – Organism. Two different words that mean different things, my brain informs me, but oh! too late.

I shake my head in response, the colour in my face returns with a vengeance. But I mean it; I don’t know what an orgasm is – not exactly anyway. I can tell by the way Mr. Pirsky is looking at me that I am under suspicion. All I can do is stare at my book, red-faced and mortified, silently counting the number of times the word ‘organism’ appears on the page.

“Never mind,” Mr. Pirsky says, letting me off the hook, but not without one last dig, “You will soon enough.”

There is a dearth of Canadian literature on White, rural, working class girls from which to draw from and theorize this piece. Yet I couldn’t bring myself to leave out this narrative because there is something in this experience that I believe is worth exploring. It is something about what Brown (1997) describes in her study of rural, working class girls in Maine, as the “contradictory nature of what constitutes appropriately feminine discourse and behavior for these girls ... a discourse that offers [them] a wide range of physical and verbal expression not usually considered under the rubric of conventional femininity” (p. 685).

I was 11 years-old at the time this embarrassing incident occurred. I already knew there was a “right” way to *look* like a girl; but I was just starting to become aware that there was a right way to *be* a girl, especially at school. It never occurred to me to try and understand what motivates the unspoken, inflexible notions of “girl;” I only discovered that I had not followed the “rubric of conventional femininity” when it was already too late to get with the program. Thus, I had inadvertently disrupted what Walkerdine (1997) describes as the production of “civilized femininity.” She argues that:

The little working-class girl presents, especially to education, an image which threatens the *safety of the discourse* of the innocent and natural child. She is too precocious, too sexual ... she is deeply threatening to a civilizing process understood in terms of the production and achievement of natural rationality and nurturant femininity (p. 4, emphasis added).

At first, I was confused about what I had said that singled me out, though I soon sensed I had exposed my experience with something that I shouldn’t have known anything about. My argument here is simply that while some working class girls may indeed challenge “the safety of the discourse”, there is nothing *inherently* “threatening” or “inappropriately sexualized” about them. Rather, working class girls may become perceived as such through a dominant discourse that perpetuates moral panic through the normalization of the innocent girl-child in need of sheltering, if not protection, from boys and the (male) adult world, (Walkerdine, 1997). More recently, Renold and Ringrose (2011) observe that the middle class have their own “norm of developmentally appropriate (hetero)sexuality” against which my sexual “knowledge,” such as it was, may have

positioned me as the “hyper-visible figure of the over- and/or inappropriately sexualized girl” (pp. 402-403). But how exactly had I become more “knowing” than my peers?

It is true that when I was growing up, I was not a frequent recipient of sheltering, but this made me neither vulnerable nor deviant. In fact, I credit my lack of sheltering as my source of ease in neighborhoods and among the kinds of people that are often considered by many of my middle class friends to be “rough” or potentially threatening to their sense of safety. I believe my lack of sheltering has allowed me to develop the skill to recognize where physical danger is most likely to exist and how to avoid becoming a target. Because of this, I am cautious when I need to be, but I am rarely fearful of anyone I meet.

My Freudian slip in science class was not an indication of developmentally inappropriate sexual interest either; it was simply an interest in reading. Dunkley (2004) suggests that “it is important to consider the ‘raw materials’ available” to young people in rural areas, as they typically lack the kinds of cultural and public spaces that urban working class youth have access to, for example, museums, movie theatres, shopping centres, public parks and libraries (p. 562; see also Preston, 2012).). For rural working class girls, especially, often the only “sanctioned teen spaces” are home and school (Dunkley, 2004, p. 560).

I was an avid reader and often received books as birthday and Christmas gifts from my parents, but I also read what ever else was lying around the house. Parenting practices in my home, where a lack of space practically guaranteed that nothing was ever private for long, certainly did not include censorship. I doubt very much that my parents paid any attention to what I was reading most of the time. As a matter of fact, I read

everything from my mom's second-hand Harlequin Romances, Maeve Binchy dramas, and Stephen King novels to my dad's small collection of biographies and his old dusty shop manuals and dirty magazines (for the articles, of course) that he kept at his garage. Our modest library, such as it was, was an eclectic assortment of books, newspapers and magazines, with not a single "classic" in the mix, unless you count *The Joy of Sex* which, as I discovered early on, contains many fascinating illustrations and educative content.

Much later, when I entered university, and especially once I started graduate school, I would recognize my lack of cultural capital by the "inappropriateness" of my reading material. A professor once declared my choices in literature "anti-feminist" after I disclosed that I had read and thoroughly enjoyed most of Hemingway's work, even his posthumous novel *The Garden of Eden*, and that I loved Raymond Chandler detective novels too. I learned that extensive reading isn't enough to ensure success in education; you must read the "right" books (which, of course, differs from one discipline to the next), and it seems I hardly ever do.

Over the course of the 8 years my family lived on the farm, we slid from working class to the category of "working poor." As I mentioned in Chapter One, the working poor consists of families and individuals who, on average, work full time hours throughout the course of a year, yet experience a similar depth of poverty as that experienced by the non-working poor (Fleury & Fortin, 2006). Thus, "working poor families are families who are 'playing by the rules' by working and contributing to the productivity and prosperity (of the country) ... but yet struggle day to day to meet their basic needs (Leach & Sikora, 2003, as cited in Fleury & Fortin, 2006, p. 5). In the worst

circumstances, those who live below low income cut-offs may experience a lack of social inclusion, precarious housing situations or even a deprivation of basic necessities (Fleury & Fortin, 2006).

Defaulted loan payments on an extension to my dad's shop marked the beginning of a long period of economic instability and material hardship. At the time, the early-mid 1980s, Alberta, along with the rest of the country, was dealing with the fallout of one of the worst recessions in Canada's history. The oil-rich province felt the effects of a sharply declining economic market harder than most, and Alberta held the nation's record for housing foreclosures, bankruptcies and suicides (CBC Learning, 2001). Being self-employed as a small business man in a very small town, my dad's work was always precarious and we had no protection from the dramatic economic downturn. In my family, there were no savings to speak of, and even the modest education fund my mom's parents had set up for me had to be used when I needed emergency root canal surgery. There was no one who could help us, not that my parents would have ever asked. To make ends meet, my mom worked simultaneously as a house cleaner for a family friend, a custodian at the local Treasury Branch, and as a short order cook at a public golf course. In the evening, when my dad would come home from work, if my mom had the afternoon shift at the golf course, he, my brother, and I would go into town and clean the bank after supper. I babysat daily for our neighbours all summer with the understanding that the money I earned would pay for all my school clothes in the fall.

We knew three men in our small rural community, husbands and fathers all, who committed suicide during those years. One of my classmates, "Tom," a cherub-faced boy who always chose me to be the "wife" to his "farmer" in rounds of *The Farmer-In-the-*

Dell back when we were in kindergarten, also committed suicide. A memorial service was held for him in our school gymnasium and his family wanted an open casket displayed so that his classmates and teachers could say a proper goodbye. I remember the hushed voices of adults as they peered into the coffin, comforting themselves with clichés, “*He looks just like he’s sleeping*” and other such euphemisms for death. But when I finally got near enough to see for myself, Tom’s waxy-looking, heavily made up face and the hairpiece that covered the holes where the bullet must have entered and exited his skull and hollowed out a core of his brain, looked grotesque to me. I hardly recognized my farmer at all.

Windows

“Sandra, can you provide us with an example of dramatic irony from Act II?”

Mr. Tyler asks, smiling expectantly at what is sure to be another bewildered expression on my face. I can’t; I’m not sure I know what “dramatic irony” is so I shake my head “no” as I have many times in my Grade 10 academic English class. Feeling like a dolt, I stare at the top of my desk and wait for Mr. Tyler to ask the next person. But he doesn’t. “Nothing?” he asks with feigned innocence.

We had just finished an introduction to Shakespeare a week earlier in which we read “Romeo and Juliet.” Although I moaned along with my classmates when this selection was announced, I was secretly excited to learn what one of the world’s most influential writers was all about. My anticipation grew as we made our way through the reading list. When at last it was time to read the great classic love story, I was demoralized by the difficulty of the writing. I didn’t get it; the rules of language, syntax and figures of speech that I was still struggling to master suddenly seem completely

irrelevant. I should have expected trouble; my grades, even in Language Arts, which had always been my highest, had been slipping over the past couple of years. I decided I didn't give two shits for Shakespeare after all.

Before Mr. Tyler can pick on someone else, he is paged to the office. A tapping on the window signals to me that my two best friends, who have a spare while I am in English, want me to join them outside for a smoke. For the second time during class I shake my head "no." I can't afford to cut any more classes, I'm barely passing as it is. My friends know this too but they persist, teasing and calling my name through the glass. By now all of my classmates have turned around to see what's going on outside. Mr. Tyler returns, but stops just outside the classroom door where he is finishing a conversation with another teacher in the hallway. It's now or never. My fear of defiance motivates a deftness even I didn't know I possessed. I open the window and catch the looks of surprise on the faces of my classmates as I slide out as stealthily as a cat burglar. My stolen freedom is exhilarating.

At home, I had always been a "good" kid, as my dad says, "*You never [sic] given me five minutes of trouble.*" Likewise, at school I was a "good" student, a real "nice" girl. So nice in fact, it often elicited comments from my teachers, classmates, as well my friends' parents. I half expect some mention of it will be made when I die, maybe as an epitaph on my gravestone: "Here lies a Nice Girl," it will say - hopefully many, many years from now.

I was groomed for niceness from an early age, along with everything else the word entails, including "well-behaved," "friendly," and "cooperative." These qualities

were, in turn, recognized and consistently reinforced in the classroom, as the following selection of report card comments attest:

“[Sandra] is a well-behaved girl and gets along well with her classmates” (Grade 2, second term).

“Sandra is a pleasant, friendly and cooperative student with whom I enjoy working” (Grade 4, second term).

“[Sandra] is a quiet, pleasant and very cooperative student” (Grade 5, second term).

Brown’s (1997) research on working class adolescent girls in rural Maine found that the girls in her study accepted conventional, that is, middle class, ideals of feminine behaviour such as being “smart” and well-liked (p. 690), as well as “always being nice ... having a good attitude and not demanding attention” (p. 693). However, as Brown (1997) notes, the working class girls’ attempts “to imitate the conventions of White middle-class femininity” typically failed (p. 693). Resisting conventional markers of femininity could, on one hand, serve working class girls well in their local community, but as Brown (1997) observes, “it puts them at odds with the expectations of their teachers and other adults invested in the conventional feminine ideal and thus underscores their displacement in school and society” (p. 683). Walkerdine (1997) also found that in the U.K., predominant descriptions used by students and their teachers to describe their *ideal* girl were “nice,” “kind,” and “helpful.” However, teachers also complained that the working class girls in their classrooms were “the most traditionally feminine—said very pejoratively” as they were the least likely to challenge non-traditional school subjects and future career opportunities (p. 46).

What these studies imply, is that no matter how hard they may try to approximate conventional feminine ideals of the ideal girl/student, or resist them, it is very hard for female, working class students to come out on top. I still believed at that time that my efforts and determination to meet those standards would eventually pay off. For example, in Grade 7, spurred on by peer competition, I was exempt from writing final exams because I had an 80% average in each of my core classes. Although this feat had taken an enormous effort from me, no one seemed to notice. Now, I was not expecting a parade or anything, but a congratulatory pat on the back from my teachers and/or parents might have been nice. In Grade 8, I decided that passing with honours was not worth all the hard work it took. Writing exams has always been relatively easy for me and they take much less time and sustained effort than year-round studying. So, instead of “honours” I passed with “merit” standing that year; my average was just over 70%.

By Grade 9 however, my best friend and I discovered the pleasantly numbing effect that alcohol had on our overly-sensitive, developing egos and we began turning our energy to more immediately rewarding pursuits, namely, drinking vodka stolen from our parents’ liquor supplies, in the girls’ washroom and then returning to class to face the rest of the afternoon’s drudgery. Getting buzzed but not so drunk as to attract unwanted attention from teachers was a tricky balancing act, so I tended to save full-on inebriation for the times when I was at home alone. At school, drinking allowed me to check out mentally, but at home, alone, it helped me to release overwhelming emotions of increasing hopelessness and anger that I could scarcely keep pent up.

Dunkley’s (2004) study looked at rural Vermont teens living in an area that is “isolated both geographically and culturally,” where there are “long, cold winters” and a

population that is “nearly 100% white” (p. 563). The kinds of “adult” and “risky activities” these teens engaged were very much a part of the ethos of my contextually similar rural community. These included: “high-speed driving, drug use and drinking and driving” (p. 563). Dunkley’s (2004) research also reveals how a certain subculture of rural girls’ challenge essentialized gender subjectivities, noting that “some girls choose to quietly break the rules, carving out a social life in prohibited places or doing prohibited behaviours, hoping not to get caught” (p. 572).

By Grade 10, when this narrative takes place, I was skipping more classes than I attended. I took the bus to school each morning but instead of going to class, my friends and I loitered around town. We often pooled our resources and hung out at *Evelyn’s Chinese-Canadian Restaurant* where fries and gravy were cheap and plentiful, and coffee refills were free. We bummed smokes, looked for someone to “pull” (buy alcohol) for us, and experimented in all sorts of risky behaviours no parent would want to know their daughter is taking part in. Lacking the kinds of “sanctioned teen spaces” for social life that urban youth have access to, such as shopping centres, public parks, movie theatres, et cetera (Dunkley, 2004, p. 560); for me and my friends it was alley-ways, back entrances to hotels and restaurants, the laundromat and nearby farmer’s fields that provided temporary refuge from the monotony and mundane humiliations of classroom life, as well as shielding us from the eyes of teachers whose presence always felt intrusive, yet rarely attentive to or genuinely concerned about what was going on in our lives, as noted by my mom during our interview:

Ria: *The thing I didn't like about that is that the teachers never talked about it. They never phoned us that you weren't in school and they didn't talk about it at parent-teacher meetings, you know?*

Sandra: *How did you find out that I was in trouble then?*

Ria: *I found out because it said on your report card so many days missing. And I didn't, I never knew that until I saw your report card. And then of course, I was really upset. And then I found out you were with the other kids, you know, drinking somewhere around the corner.*

I still cared enough about school to at make an effort at being a “good” student though, which to me, meant completing my work and not causing anyone “5 minutes of trouble,” as my dad had put it. I might have skipped too many of Mr. Tyler's, and other teacher's classes, but I never failed to hand in a paper, finish reading an assigned novel, nor did I ever miss an exam. Clearly there was a disconnect between the image I wanted to project/maintain and my distinctly “laddish behaviour” (see Willis, 1977). Walkerdine (1997) offers insight into the contradictory behaviour I, and others, have been known to exhibit. She suggests that when working class girls:

metaphorically turn the other cheek in kind and selfless helpfulness, they are psychically coping with the struggle between opposing forces within themselves, with anger never put forward as a weapon with which to fight oppression: thus anger and violent feelings inside themselves (associated with masculinity) are to be defended against in favour of the accomplishment of feminine virtues. (p. 48)

Freud (1917) highlighted the connection between unconscious anger and “melancholia,” or prolonged grieving, which he considered to be part of a “pathological

disposition” caused by feelings of “ambivalence” (p. 242). This period of mid-adolescence was probably the time that I experienced depression, though I would have never framed it as such, was never diagnosed and, in fact, never even thought to seek help for it. Nor would it be my last excursion into the dark, as one of the hazards of conducting autoethnography included, for me, a “return to the repressed” along with the state of mind that entailed (Bourdieu, 2007).

Back then, I had hoped that someone would catch me “quietly breaking the rules,” but no one seemed to notice that I was gradually sliding away. My overt behaviour made me the kind of student and daughter that no one worried about. As my dad says of the problems I was facing at school and at home, *“I had no clue, honestly.”* Furthermore, because my parents raised me and my brother to be self-reliant, we never asked for anything, at school or at home. The result, as my mom says, was that *“it wasn’t very often that we had to help you kids out.”* My teachers must have felt the same way. Either that or I really was invisible to them. As long as I didn’t cause trouble, it seemed everyone was happy. Everyone except me. My double-life felt out of my control but I felt helpless to change my circumstances.

I did have something positive going for me though; I still had hopes to participate in university one day. Expectations for young people to attend university were not part of the ethos of my disadvantaged rural school or the broader community in which it is located (Tranter, 2003). In fact, my school seemed to have had what Tranter (2003) describes as a “pervading culture of academic non-achievement” (p. 3). *The Report Card on Alberta’s High Schools* published yearly by the Fraser Institute, looks at several key academic indicators of school performance including gender differences in Pure

Mathematics 30, diploma completion, delayed advancement rates, and average diploma examination marks, among other factors (Cowley, & Easton, 2013). While there are criticisms of its methodology and the ranking system itself, *The Report Card* does provide a general sense of how schools compare to one another across the provinces. Scores are averaged out to come up with an overall ranking out of 10. My school consistently ranked in the bottom quartile over the 5-year period from 2008-2012 that was available for viewing, which, to both my dismay and relief, supports my memories of the quality of education I received there nearly 30 years earlier. Tranter (2003) claims that in rural and other marginalized communities, where few adults have attended university themselves, an orientation towards university education often does not become part of the habitus of the students who live there.

Despite my family's circumstances, the community environment and a school climate that was not the most conducive to supporting a university-oriented habitus, it somehow did become part of mine. But not without contradiction; first, because I lacked a reference point for a life that required university education; second, I was not encouraged by any of the adults in my life to participate in university; and third, going to university would require me to stand apart from my family and peers when I had been raised to value fitting in to my environment.

This period of growing awareness of when and how I did not fit into the fields of school and family life, perhaps marks the emergence of my cleft habitus. Recall that Bourdieu (2002) conceived of the habitus as being relatively stable, but he acknowledged that in some cases, "innovations" may appear, generated by tensions and struggles that occur when an individual finds her/himself in an unfamiliar field. Accordingly, when

agents act in contradiction to their habitus they can challenge the very structure(s) that put them into question in that field in the first place, “sometimes to the point of remaking it” (pp. 31-32). Those who find themselves in fields that challenge their habitus are known as “*en porte-à-faux*,” or misfits (p. 32).

In addition to the markers of ethnicity and my relationship to rurality, my misfit identity was reinforced by a relative degree of worldliness. Cairns’s (2014) research suggests that travel experience, which I had “thanks” to the fact that we had no extended family living in Canada. Travel experience may be considered a form of cultural capital and shown to facilitate “more expansive geographies of the future” (Cairns, 2014, p. 485). Besides, my parents had emigrated, and the idea of leaving family behind to pursue life elsewhere was not strange or frightening to me (although fear of leaving them in a more abstract sense is another story—*this* story, in fact). Meanwhile, Corbett (2007b) suggests that women’s’ migration from rural areas may be understood as “a form of resistance to the gender stratified opportunity structure in which they saw their mothers and peers ‘trapped’” (p. 261). Certainly, my ability to imagine myself elsewhere would have stood in contrast to the fantasies of my girlfriends, whose lives were “centrally defined by rurality” and did not seem to feel the same kind of need I did, to plan for another kind of life (Cairns, 2014, p. 485).

Without fully appreciating the consequences of the educational decisions I was making, I intuited that the success of my resistance to being trapped by gender expectations and rural life would be determined by my ability to challenge the opportunities of my class structure, so I enrolled in the “academic” stream in high school. At that time, students could choose from three different course streams each of which led

to very different outcomes and thus, different life trajectories. The choices back then were to take the “applied”, “general” or “academic” stream. The two friends I mentioned in my narrative enrolled in what was then officially known as the “applied” course stream, which is currently referred to as “Knowledge and Employability Courses.” (Alberta Education, 2015). Of course, simply changing the name does not change the program of study and students often come up with their own labels. In my day, this route was pejoratively known as “classes for dummies.”

My under-resourced school did not have a guidance councillor. Neither the principal nor my teachers (except my math teacher who advised me *against* taking his advanced math course) had ever offered me advice about how to prepare for an academic future. I knew my parents had limited experience with PSE and even less knowledge of the Canadian system of higher education, so I did not turn to them for guidance. Besides, I had already learned not to expect to receive help with school, and was used to blindly cutting my own path. Stubbornly ignoring peer pressure and conventional wisdom, I enrolled in and clung desperately to the academic stream, even though my high school records indicate that I should have stuck with courses of a more practical nature.

For example, a look at my “Statement of Courses and Marks” from Alberta Education shows that in Grade 10 I earned 44% in Biology 10; 46% in Math 13 (the first of seven math classes I would take as I zig-zagged my way through the “general” and “academic” streams until I had finally earned a “matriculation” diploma, three and a half years later). I passed Social Studies 10 with 51%; Physical Education with 54%; and received a mark of 57% for my loathed English 10 class. The only decent grades I earned that year were for Instrumental Music: 72%, for my unreliable efforts as a reluctant

flutist; and a single grade listed beneath the heading of “Honours”—90% in Art, one of few classes I truly enjoyed, but never pursued further.

My partner, a tenured professor from a similar socio-cultural background—that is White and from the thin end of working class, whose educational narrative features the more familiar trope of the urban “scholarship boy” (Borkowski, 2004, p. 98), identified as “gifted” despite his own “disadvantaged” background—had this to say after looking at my high school records: *“Those sure don’t look like the grades of someone who’s on track for university.”* (Surely, there are implicit comparisons to be made here, for instance between opportunity structures for White, working class male vs. White, working class female students; urban and rural education; and the hyper-visibility of the “gifted” label vs. the invisibility of non-giftedness. Unfortunately, explicating those relationships goes beyond the scope of this project). While my grades may have suggested that I was better suited to a less intellectually demanding program, Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller (2007) warn that “streaming,” which is commonly practiced in Canadian schools, “result[s] in noticeably poor outcomes for disadvantaged children and youth (p. 704). They recommend that the most effective way schools can make a difference to achievement outcomes for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is to keep courses heterogeneous, although, to date, these students continue to be disproportionately represented in the applied stream (Ferguson, et al., 2007).

My academic decisions, such as they were, were not made with the intention of reaching any specific goal. Lacking a career aspiration or a reference point for a life that required higher education made the possibility of attending university seem as obtainable as reaching a mirage—I was never sure how, when, or even *if* I would ever reach my

hazy vision of something “better.” My motivation to enroll in the academic stream was based on my desperate need not to become trapped by geographical and gendered expectations. But my avoidance-approach style to decision making has meant that I have made my way through school inefficiently, “taking the long way ‘round” as the saying goes, which my delayed, circuitous and prolonged path through the education system (and this thesis) will attest (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008). Still, it seems to be the only way I know how to keep myself moving forward at all.

Whiteness by Degree: Between Privileged and Passing

When I was 16 years old our family gained a temporary new member, “James,” a nephew of a friend, a teenage boy a year older than me and of Metis origin, who I wrote about in Chapter One. At the time, I took James’s presence in our lives for granted. It was only much later, in graduate school after being introduced to the concept of “White privilege,” that I found myself going back to reflect on this period of my life and to consider the implications of growing up not realizing that my race granted me unearned privileges.

The narrative that follows is not about race, per se. It describes my adolescent concerns for keeping up appearances with my Dutch cousins who enjoyed a higher standard of living than my family did, being citizens of a country that provided a social welfare net that is even wider and more generous than Canada’s. Today when I think back on this time, my comparison is not with my cousins, but with James, whose experience in our White, European home I had barely considered when I was growing up. Thus, the analysis that follows begins with a more general discussion of the relational aspect of social

class, then moves towards my attempt to grapple with the issue of White privilege as I understand it *today*, from the perspective of a woman from a working class background.

Weeds

Three of my cousins from the Netherlands have decided to come to Canada and stay with our family for the month of July. My dad will close his shop for a couple of weeks while they are here. He thinks we should take them to Vancouver to see Expo 86', and do some camping along the way. My mom will stay home since she can't take time off from her cooking job at the golf course and her cleaning job at the bank. In theory, my dad's plan sounds fun, but I'm afraid it won't be. Our beat-up car and second-hand tent trailer are both in need of some "minor" repairs. The long, hot drive across provinces in a non-air-conditioned vehicle filled with four teenagers, my 10-year-old brother, my dad, and a crackling AM radio for entertainment, is also less than appealing. But the real reason for my lack of enthusiasm is that I'm anxious about having my cousins see how we live.

The cousins are from my dad's side of the family, but somehow their families seem to have done better for themselves than we have. They live in vibrant towns and cities where they hang out daily with their friends. We live in a run-down, rented farm house in the middle of the kind of nowhere that looks like the dusty wild west in "Gun Smoke." My cousins take summer vacations on the beaches of Spain and Turkey. They hike in Austria in the fall, and ski in Switzerland during the winter. They wind surf, take tennis lessons, speak multiple languages, wear stylish clothes, and have regular dental appointments. Nothing they own ever looks worn out or dirty or broken. Everything about their lives just seems so much... better.

My hypercritical teenager's eye takes in everything that is wrong with us; from the green plastic clock on the kitchen wall that "tick-tocks" incessantly throughout the otherwise silent evening hours as my dad's supper grows cold on the kitchen table; our tiny, old-fashioned, black and white television set with tin-foiled rabbit ears and three unreliable channels that my mom sits in front of each night, staring blankly at its screen after us kids have eaten; the window panes stuffed with old, yellowed newspapers to keep drafts out; even the bathroom—the only one in this rambling house—small and outdated, with a water supply that regularly threatens to run out, forcing us to share bath water. And then there are the weeds...

Those weeds. They grow at the side of the garage and between the written off vehicles my dad keeps around for spare parts. Now, they are almost taller than me and so dense that our sheep could get lost in them. My mom has begged my dad to take care of them since the beginning of summer. His answer is always the same: "I'll do it this weekend," but the weeds are last thing on his list of priorities. Our yard is in such a sad state of neglect and the weeds have become the target of my despair. One evening after supper as we sit mutely together, my frustration turns to outrage. I want to scream at my family, at no one in particular, at the world: "Why are we living like this?!" I keep it bottled up though; nothing good has ever come from kicking off in front of my parents. Instead I scrape my chair away from the table and storm out of the house. The front door slams behind me as I leave them, along with my brother and James, in stunned silence at the kitchen table.

Moments later, I find myself standing at the edge of a massive thorny overgrowth, yanking at the weeds with all my might. Stalks thicker than my dad's work-gnarled

fingers snap and break off uselessly in my hands, but my rage wants retribution. My eyes are full of tears and there is a muffled sound inside my head. I feel like I am underwater, but I ignore it and continue to inflict my violence on the weeds. Then I notice that my dad is standing beside me; my brother and James have come outside too. Dad remarks, dryly, that I should put on a pair of gloves. I stop my manic efforts to inspect my shaking hands. They are bleeding, but only a little bit. My brother complains that he doesn't want to pull weeds, but my dad hands him a shovel anyway. James meanwhile, stands there looking at me with an expression I can't quite read. Is he going to laugh at me, really?! I swear, I will kill him. He watches me with a look of detached amusement, like I'm a crazy person—probably harmless, but someone who should be given a wide berth anyway, just to stay on the safe side. Then it hits me; I think it's recognition that I see in his eyes. Still smirking at me, James picks up the shovel and starts digging.

Of all the qualities of home life during my adolescence, silence, as an unbearable source of tension, marks many of my memories. There were a number of years when I was growing up that I felt as though we were four silent strangers sharing a house; we just didn't communicate as a family. I think back to my interview with my mom who said of her parents, *"They went through a rough time and they just didn't talk very much about it."* Similarly, my own parents didn't talk about the financial and material hardships we had to endure as a family, about my dad's failing business, or the problems in their marriage. No matter what happened in our personal lives, we were expected to go on as normal, even though our circumstances sometimes made it was impossible to be "normal." Upon reading the following question posed by Walkerdine (1997), my parents' silence, especially around our "rough time," began to make more sense to me. She asks,

“What if [parents] did all they knew how to do to protect [their children], which was to say nothing?” (p. 43). She further suggests that one reason why many working class families, like my own, lack a deep sense of family history is because silence can be an effective strategy towards a “psychology of survival” (p. 43).

Walkerdine (1997) explains that the pain of struggles, in which children witness their family members going without, never being able to stop working, becoming old before their time, getting hurt or even killed on the job, is woven into the fabric of working class life so that “it exists there as patterns of conscious and unconscious coping, passed down through generations” (p. 37). I think of my mom recalling how she lost her uncle to an explosion in the mines when she was a child, and that her own father had lost several fingers and his cardiovascular health there as well. Walkerdine (1997) suggests that patterns of silence that emerge from individual and family traumas, i.e., the need for “just getting on without making a fuss,” may take shape as defenses that produce family practices such as stoicism, which seeks to avoid the anxiety of living in poor or dangerous conditions (p. 43).

Bourdieu (1999) was concerned with human suffering that is expressed through “social signs that are difficult to interpret precisely because they seem so obvious” (p. 629). “Positional suffering,” he argued, is experienced from within the social microcosm. In *Weeds*, my suffering stemmed from what I perceived to be my family’s inferior position in relation to extended family in the Netherlands, which wouldn’t have featured quite as prominently on my radar, but was brought to the fore by my cousin’s imminent arrival. Bourdieu explained that positional suffering will appear to be “entirely relative,” meaning completely unreal if taken from the point of view of the macrocosm and

compared to the “‘real’ suffering of material poverty” (p. 4). Likewise, my sense of suffering was diffused among the broader context of Alberta’s recession and among differences in the social welfare systems of two countries. If the personal effects of these kinds of broader socio-political and economic circumstances on individuals and their families are not acknowledged at school or in the home, experiences of suffering seem to lack an explanation. This does not make it disappear or feel any less real, however. My suffering lived on as a kind of bewildering shame about my family circumstances for which I believed we alone were to blame, and from which I desperately wanted to leave.

People often say that suffering is character-building. I don’t know about that, but it is skill-building. I learned a lot during that formative period of my life, like how to ignore a ringing telephone at all hours of the day and night; how to shun the kinds of status symbols that are important to teenagers—designer jeans and a school ring, for example, and other things that cost extra money, like clubs or school trips that parents had to contribute to. I learned how to save whatever I could earn through babysitting jobs and returning our empty bottles to the dump. I learned to budget carefully. Asking for money or for material things that extended beyond our day-to-day necessities would only cause my dad to shout, “*What are you, a sheep? You want to be just like everyone else?!*” I never had the heart to tell him that yes actually, that was all I ever wanted.

I didn’t have a clue then, that I had White privilege; I certainly didn’t feel very privileged. At home, we never talked about class, race or gender inequality. There was no need; everything was just “the way it is.” At school, we were never made to question the classed, racialized or gendered implications of our curriculum or the dominant (Eurocentric, middle class) values embedded within our community either. If issues of

social difference were discussed at all, it was from a geographical or historical distance, such as learning about caste systems in India or apartheid in South Africa, and only in social studies classes. Likewise, teachings about Canada's Indigenous and Metis peoples were presented as a separate unit of the curriculum and taught from an uncritical and (even then) outdated colonialist perspective.

I was introduced to the concept of White privilege in what I suppose must be the standard method for most students—through Peggy Macintosh's (1989) "invisible knapsack." I must say it was a revelation to find out that my skin colour opens doors for me. I am somewhat ashamed to admit that my first thought was "*Why didn't I know this before?*" certain that this information might have been useful to me at an earlier time in my life. But that is the point. The normalization of Whiteness is what makes it so effective, the benefits come automatically so that we, who are White, don't even have to know we have it to benefit from it. Though, as Camfield (2014) points out, people don't freely choose privilege—it comes from belonging to a dominant group, whether they want it or not.

My introduction to the concept made me feel as if I was being pulled in opposite directions. By all visible measures, I was middle class woman who I knew should be able to answer a resounding "yes" to each of the listed privileges. But my "other" self understood these privileges through the additional lens of my working class/working poor background, which made for a more complicated reading. For example, the statement, "*If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live,*" did not elicit an automatic affirmative response from me, as it surely wouldn't from any number of students who

have grown up in affordable housing or “projects” that are typically not located in the most desirable or safest neighbourhoods. Nor would it apply to many other young adults and university graduates today, who may have grown up in what were perceived as stable, middle class homes in good neighbourhoods, but who are unable to afford the kind of housing their parents had because of challenging economic circumstances and precarious work situations that seem to have become the new “normal” for their generation. Likewise, for the statement *“I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me”* was problematic for me as well, though perhaps not for the reasons Peggy Macintosh might have had in mind when she created her list. I am often surrounded by people I am uncomfortable with. For example, progressive, “lefty” intellectuals whose eloquent words and social critiques I often find compelling, but who also intimidate me with those same words and discourses, and who I can never completely trust because they work as/for an institution that historically hasn’t served people from my social background very well.

Camfield (2014) suggests that understanding class as being about exploitation is very different from thinking about class in terms of privilege. This is especially relevant for White working class people who typically haven’t had the same kind of beneficial relationship to privilege (understood as material/economic or symbolic privileges in the present), as their White middle and upper class counterparts. White, as well as other non-Indigenous working class people (even those who have been affected by racism, Camfield argues) are just as likely to receive present benefits from Canada’s past exploitation of Indigenous peoples and lands, as are the ruling capitalist class. By making the problems of working class people invisible in the mass media and through discourses

that ignore social inequality, in conjunction with focusing on the “unreasonable” demands for justice by Indigenous peoples and blaming them for problems in society, working class people are encouraged to bond with the ruling class. However, as Camfield (2014) points out, working class people are exploited by the same ruling capitalist class. He predicts that when non-Indigenous working class people recognize this, “openings are created for convincing them to support the struggle against colonialism” (para. 16).

Likewise, Skourtes (2016) draws a connection between the suffering of White and Aboriginal working class women, suggesting that the “negative” emotional responses they are reported to express such as anger, hopelessness, fear, and loneliness should “be considered as an affective expression of pain attached to the [erasure of] history of colonization and the cultural politics of working class abjection” (p. 390). This concerns me, not only because I am a White, middle class woman who is educated about and concerned with issues of social inequality, but because I am a woman from a working class/working poor background and I know what it *feels* like to be at the bottom - to feel unnoticed, unheard and powerless.

I have always maintained that my concerns for the economic and social well-being of my parents, childhood friends, and others from my social background are legitimate and cannot be reduced to “first world problems.” Today, I also recognize that no matter how abject my personal circumstances may have seemed in the past, or may be again in the future, my life circumstances and accompanying sense of injustice are not equivalent to the persistent “third world living conditions” and experiences described by an Indigenous student recently in the news (Maloney, 2016). Conducting this autoethnography has helped me connect to something beyond my raw emotional

experiences, personal affinities and contradictory subjectivities by acknowledging their existence *as well as* the structural causes from which they emerge. Although the process has often been painful and confusing for me, I believe it has been necessary to work through to acquire a deep level of self-knowledge and subsequently, greater understanding of the social world and how it works for different groups of people. My experience of returning, metaphorically and literally, to my roots is captured eloquently in the words of Bourdieu (2007) who wrote:

A whole part of myself was given back to me, the very part by which I was bound to them and which distanced me from them, because I could not deny it without renouncing them, ashamed of both them and myself. (p. 62)

Thus, the “return to my origins,” which was both necessitated and facilitated by my participation in higher education, has been accompanied by a return to my “old self,” but it has been, as Bourdieu (2007) described it, a “*controlled* return, of the repressed” (p. 62; emphasis added).

Although I haven’t always felt this way, having been a social class underdog has, in many ways, been an advantage, particularly in my current position as a “first-generation middle class” woman and as a graduate student in the Faculty of Education because it has given me a broader range of understanding for the experiences of marginalized others (Crozier, et al., 2008). It is an understanding that encompasses practical or “bottom up” knowledge that comes from living in the lower margins of society (Richardson, 2009), as well as institutionalized or “top down” knowledge that comes from my participation in higher education. However, it is my lived experience with suffering and accompanying worldview from the bottom that enables me to identify

with other marked groups I have encountered, not only those from the poor and working class, but also LGBT, people who are marginalized by (dis)ability, People of Colour and Aboriginal people, whose perspectives and presence are necessary to my sense of connectedness to something more powerful than my individual experiences.

While James worked towards graduating from the rural school I had attended for the last seven years, I started Grade 11 at another school about 30 kilometres from where we lived. At the end of my disastrous 10th grade, I had asked my parents if I could follow a friend (the same one I used to drink with in the girls' washroom) to an urban, Catholic high school in the small industrial city we had lived in when I was young. To my surprise, they agreed. My dad went with me to make the arrangements, and I was required to sign a contract promising that I would never skip class, drink or do drugs at school. I signed it, thinking it would be unlikely that I could keep my promise.

Although transportation from the farm to the city was inconvenient and complicated for the first year, it was soon simplified by my parents' decision to separate:

Ria: *Things went really bad and your dad and me were going to split up. And you and [your brother] - well, I had rented a house in [the city] and that's where we were going to move to. And then after a lot of fights and grumbling Dad decided finally to come along, because he didn't want to at first. And from then on I told him I was going to look after the money. And the shop had to be closed because he wasn't making any money. You know, he did too much work for nothing... or for a bottle of booze, or a couple of steaks. You know, all farmers in [the] area, they don't pay with cash money; they give you some meat or something. Well, you can't pay the rent with that, or [the]*

bills, so that's when I started looking after the money and bills, paycheques, everything. And I'm still doing it up till today.

I remember that period of our lives very well. I had spent the entire summer before my parent's split and our move from the farm, waking at around 3:45 each morning and wandering around in a barley field on the other side of our gravel road. Only after the star-specked sky faded from black to navy to purple, finally reaching the blue hour with its thin sliver of orange peaking above the horizon, would I make my way home again. Only then could I crawl back into my bed - damp, tired and mosquito-bitten – for half an hour or so, until someone came to “wake” me for school.

As bad as things seemed at home, the thought of this desolate little island that was my family dissolving beneath me was much worse. But, as my mom explained, in the end the worst never happened; my anxieties were for naught. This was such a relief to me at the time because I had secretly been worried that my mom wouldn't be able to pay the bills on her own, and that I would have to drop out of school to work and help care for my little brother. Looking back now, I realize my mom would have never let that happen; I think she would have worked a dozen jobs to keep me and my brother in school if she had had to. But she didn't have to. To the best of her ability, my mom took control of her own life and our family's well-being. Unlike the educated and well-connected “golden skirts” who have taken the stage in contemporary feminism, my mom's battles were not fought in a boardroom, negotiating gender quotas for CEOs or accompanying concerns for wage equality (Wolf, 2015). They were fought in our home, over the mundane necessities such as securing decent affordable housing and taking charge of our family's dire financial circumstances. When she took charge, the shift in the power dynamics

within my family structure had a profound effect on me. Although my mom would never think to use this term to describe herself, she is an example of what a feminist might look like to a working class girl. And while my notions of feminism and what it means to be a feminist have expanded since this time, this strong, selfless and smart woman continues to embody much of what a feminist looks like to me today.

Oddly enough, what had seemed to me at least, to be a dramatic turn of events in my parent's marriage and our family life, was never mentioned again. No couple's therapy or family counseling for us, not even an informal family discussion over supper to explain what had happened or why. Nothing. It was as if my parents expected my brother and I to go on as if nothing had ever happened or changed. And we did, sort of.

Part of the process of carrying on as "normal" involved my adjustment to a new school. The Catholic high school I had just started to attend, though still small, was modern and adequately staffed with a guidance counsellor and a qualified French teacher. Not only that, it was also fully resourced with a designated art room, various sports teams and a whole lot of other stuff I didn't know a school could have: an entire *room* full of computers, a kiln, a drama club, and an entirely new social class of kids—urban, middle class teenagers. Despite the many advantages I now had, I spent a very lonely first term trying to adjust to the culture of my new school while still feeling bewildered and preoccupied with the anticlimactic events of my family life. It wasn't easy since my friend dumped me when I defied her advice and went, alone, to a party hosted by the "wrong" kind of people. She had found her "place" the year before, among the jocks and popular girls. She expected me to join her, but for reasons I couldn't understand I wasn't comfortable with her anymore, or with her new crowd. Since I couldn't see anything

wrong with the guy from the smoke pit who invited me to his party, I accepted his invitation. Everyone there was friendly enough, but I didn't find my place among the extroverted party-revellers. Ostracized by my friend and her influential clique, and not readily finding another group to fit in with, I missed my old friends even more. Although I was tempted, part of me knew that I could never go back to my rural school. Just the thought of it felt like a death sentence.

But another part of me was lonelier than ever, and felt a need to do something drastic to prevent myself from returning to the place where I knew that self-destruction would at least occur among friends. So, I did what women over the ages have done to mark a fresh start. I got my haircut. Gone were the shoulder-length tresses that had taken me years to grow, which I tortured daily into stiffly shellacked curls that made my mom proud. In their place, a short, boyish coif, buzz cut half-way up the back of my head. If I had been at all uncertain about the direction I was taking, that haircut, my *first* professional haircut, sealed my fate. There was no going back to the ultra-conservative small town of my youth with that head. And, as I soon discovered, there was no fitting in with the "in" crowd at my new school either.

Tress-passing

I sit in the hairstylist's chair and show her a picture of the punk-inspired haircut I want: closely shaved up to the occipital bone, cut over the ears with shaggier layers on top and the bangs teased up and off the forehead. The stylist looks at the picture, then takes my blonde, unnaturally curly hair into her hands and runs her fingers through the baby-fine strands while gazing at me in the mirror. "What is she thinking?" I wonder. "Is she going to try and talk me out of it? I won't back down; I'll find someone else to cut

my hair,” I think to myself. But I hope it won’t come to that. I have no experience with hair salons and don’t know where, beyond the mall, to go for a haircut. Her verdict, when it finally comes, is this: “You can pull it off.” Then, as if issuing a warning, she adds, “But I wouldn’t do it if you weren’t dressed like this.”

My attention is drawn back to the outfit I donned in the morning: a black beret that sits askew on my head, a large black- and white-checked “keffiyeh” draped loosely around my neck, the two items of clothing I appropriated from my dad’s closet - a thick, hand knit sweater that my oma made, a bit too small for him and way too big for me - and his old, woolen army jacket. A pair of baggy black cotton pants “pegged” just above my favourite hand-me-downs - pink leather high-tops one of my cousin’s left behind - completes a look that has become somewhat of a uniform for me. My relief at the stylist’s agreement to chop my hair distracts me from a later thought: What exactly did she mean about being “dressed like this” anyway?

Conforming to the norm was always important to me, and has always been related to my longing to fit in to my social environment. At my new school, fitting in was dependent on my ability to “pass” as middle class. Passing was dependent on how well I could manage to “do normative categories, such as whiteness, femininity and heterosexuality” (Lundstrom, 2010, p. 71).” Whiteness? Check. Heterosexuality? Double check. But pulling off a normative performance of femininity had always been a bit of a crap shoot for me. With my slightly androgynous looks, skinny limbs and a few less than lady-like habits, it took a bit of effort to pull off. The trouble was I could never feel the mask slipping until it was too late. I still don’t, but today I am not nearly as concerned about it.

Brown's (1997) study on working class girls and femininity would suggest that although many of my behaviours and preferences signalled an ambivalent relationship to middle class ideals and respectability and, "in some cases, resistance to the dominant ideologies of femaleness as passive, accommodating, and helpless," they may have also worked to reinforce my station in life (p. 685). Oddly, this was the only time I recall having to contend *directly* with the implications of a lower social status. My detractor (a boy from my French class), shared my social background, although I only learned this much later. After turning him down for a date he accused me, in front of many of our classmates, of being "*poor white trash*," then made some other equally charming remarks about my gender and station.

"White trash," hooks (2000) explains, is an insult used by Whites against poor Whites, especially against those who flaunt their poverty. Today, I wonder if my classmate was firing ugly words and phrases at me in defence of what he assumed was my rejection of him based on his own low social position, hoping perhaps, to hit a target and put me "in my place." I will never know his motives for certain, but at any rate, his accusations left me reeling with embarrassment and a bewildering sense of shame.

The thing is, my mom had always cared far too much about our "respectability" for us to be White trash. Her pride showed in the cleanliness of our subsidized townhouse, which she kept so spotless it seemed a source of constant wonder and commentary for anyone who visited. Her concern showed in my brother's and my physical appearances—we were well-groomed and our clothes, even second hand ones, were always clean, ironed and showed few signs of wear (no ironically ripped jeans, intentionally mismatched socks, thread-bare or too-small t-shirts for us). No one could

ever tell my mom that her kids weren't presentably turned out. And it showed in our behaviour too; both she and my dad made sure we were respectful to everyone, and especially deemed to be an authority figure (and everyone, it seemed, was an authority on something). Anyway, if we had been White trash, we would have been White *euro*-trash, which is much more chic. Alas, snappy comebacks, among other things, always come to me too late for me to use them. At the time, I just stood there, speechless and mortified, while some hidden part of me got straight to work burying the whole awful incident deep in the recesses of my memory. Then, while rummaging through the old vault for "data," I inadvertently disturbed it—a yearbook photograph and the ghost of something still hurting, exhumed after years of diligent un-remembering on my part. The takeaway from all of this is, for me, simply this: Names *do* hurt, even those as clichéd as "poor White trash," and even more so when they cut too close to the bone. Anyone who says otherwise has probably never been called one.

As for that haircut, I doubt it would turn heads today. It was not that radical. But in 1985, in a conservative, Catholic high school situated in a small, semi-rural industrial city, it made a statement. What was that statement exactly? Apart from being a physical reminder for me never to look back, and perhaps providing a hint of my future ideological development, this haircut embodied my refusals of both the Catholic, middle class culture of my new school (in which I felt I had been refused), and conventional forms of femininity, which I had struggled with occasionally in the past. When I returned to school the next day, I made a friend, a girl who had moved from Texas. She wore a "uniform" too. She dressed head to toe in black, with a huge football jersey layered over top. Her messy, dyed black hair and bright red lipstick smeared across her mouth, *a la*

Robert Smith, made her look exactly like a female version of the lead singer for The Cure.

At first, the popular kids called me called a “poser” and referred to us as “squids,” when they saw us hanging around together. Whenever I entered the washroom, girls stopped talking to each other and sniggered behind my back. The jocks gave me hurt, confused looks, as if they felt betrayed: “*Why don’t you want me to want you?*” their eyes seemed to say. But I didn’t care about being wanted by them or their pretty, popular girlfriends anymore. My long-standing desire to just be “normal” and fit into the mainstream was quickly fading, as Bourdieu (1984) might have predicted when he wrote:

The calls to order (“Who does she think she is?” “That’s not for the likes of us”) which reaffirm the principle of conformity—the only explicit norm of popular taste—and aim to encourage the “reasonable” choices that are in any case imposed by the objective conditions also contain a warning against the ambition to distinguish oneself by identifying with other groups, that is they are a reminder for the need for class solidarity. (pp. 380-381)

It was only a haircut, but somehow because of it, I had unintentionally made a stand that enabled me to discover my sense of place - wobbling along the fringes of the mainstream.

I made more friends, I made amends, I got a boyfriend, and family life became gradually easier. My dad had been working as a painter for a trucking company and my mom worked as a cook at one of the nearby chemical plant sites, so money wasn’t as tight anymore. My 2 years of Catholic school did everything I had hoped. I straightened out and, for the most part, kept my promise to the school principal. Although I could not

repair all the damage I had caused to my grades, I did manage to graduate on time, with a general diploma. I immediately decided to return to high school for an extra semester to pick up credits in Math 30 and Biology 30 so I could upgrade to a “matriculation” diploma, because well, you never know when it might come in handy. Then I went to work because I had no other plans for my future, nor the means to make plans. Among the jobs I held over the next dozen years were: table busser and dishwasher; McDonald’s cashier; Beaver Lumber store clerk; house cleaner; “office” assistant (which included doing my boss’s laundry and watering his house plants); sales clerk, assistant manager and manager for Lady Footlocker; caterer; “beer-bunny” at a golf course; waitress and restaurant manager.

At 23, I married a friend from high school because he asked me to and I couldn’t think of a good reason to exempt myself from a tradition I didn’t believe in but had always known I would eventually succumb to. After less than 2 years of feeling “trapped” in my stable marriage, I asked for a divorce. Luckily, neither of us earned enough money at our respective retail jobs to have qualified to buy our own house. And, since we both agreed that although children are indeed little miracles, these adorable burdens also devour family resources. Since our own were extremely limited, children had been out of the question. Ours was a clean break; no muss, no fuss, at least not in any financial or material sense. The collateral damages of a low social position work best on the psyche.

More time passed. I changed jobs a few times but did not take a break from working. No matter what I did though, I could never earn enough money to pay for a wild night in a student pub, never mind a year’s worth of tuition. Instead of going to college or

university I enrolled in Continuing Education classes: Grade 10 chemistry, Beginner Dutch, Levels 1 and 2 of American Sign Language, and a course in holistic health.

I loved Continuing Ed. I met a lot of people “like me”—self-supporting, mature men and women with dreams of possibility. But I was lost and not getting any closer to knowing what I wanted to do with my life. Borrowing money to go to PSE seemed out of the question, especially given my parents’ experience with a loan years earlier. What if, after graduating, I couldn’t get a good job to pay back the money I owed? The strange thing was, the longer I stayed in the workforce, even though the jobs I held paid poorly and were, for the most part, personally unsatisfying, the more hesitant I became about returning to school. Maybe I was too old for PSE, maybe academic work would prove to be too challenging for me. After all, I was hardly an intellectual superstar in high school. Maybe I would fail and end up wasting money, not to mention the time taken away from being a responsible tax-paying citizen. Out of all the “traps” I had managed to avoid or wriggle out of this far: the applied stream, rural life, and marriage (my parents’ and my own), I now felt trapped by an overwhelming fear of making the *wrong* decision. Although I openly rationalized my hesitations about enrolling in PSE, secretly I feared that there was something very wrong with me.

When I finally worked up the courage to apply to college at age 30, with the help of my boyfriend’s mother, an Adult Education and ESL instructor, I couldn’t believe the acceptance letters weren’t a mistake. Community college is where I finally learned the fundamentals of English grammar. Free, informal writing skills services offered to students on a first-come, first-served basis were invaluable to me. The women who helped me work through my papers inculcated the “practical logic” of language that

allowed me to feel the rhythm of punctuation and grammar that supports composition. If I have become a half-way decent writer it is in no small part due to their patient support and unwavering efforts.

My expectations for my first PSE experience were very utilitarian. I wanted to escape from the low-skilled, minimally paid workforce that I had been part of since graduating from high school a dozen years earlier, and establish myself in what I imagined to be a “legitimate” career. Those expectations were well on the way to being exceeded by the end of my first term, when my GPA was 3.94. Although I remained one of the quieter students, in this environment of mature, working class women, I felt freer to speak up in class. Ten months after I entered college, I graduated proudly, with *Distinction*. My first cautious baby-step into the world of higher education had been a success.

Note the use of the word “distinction” as a way to distinguish the “somebodies,” from the populace of mass education. Walkerdine (1997) writes that middle class girls do not need to imagine they are “somebody;” they are told from birth that they already are. For female, working class students, especially those of us who are not “gifted,” *somebody* is who we strive to become. The word “distinction” on my college transcript told me that I could be somebody. My exposure and ability to adapt to the new field of higher education facilitated a gradual transformation of my habitus. Eventually, I would discover that I not only wanted, but expected, more from my education, my work, and myself.

Emotional Capital: A Mother’s Investment

“Why didn’t you guys ever tell us you wanted us to go to college or university when we were growing up?” I asked my mom one day as we drove home from one of our infamous “shopping” trips.

It was reading week and my mom and I spent an afternoon at Ikea, looking at things we would like to have, putting them into our carts and taking them to the checkout. Then I awoke from the powerful spell of the winter clearance sale to the realization that even at “Fifty to Seventy-Five Percent Off Our Already Low Prices!” I still couldn’t afford to buy all this stuff. Besides, I told myself, I didn’t really need any of it anyway. Before long, my mom also talked herself out of her potential purchases as well. Sheepishly, we left our place in checkout limbo, and retraced our steps back through the aisles of planters, picture frames, dish towels, and packages of crispy Swedish cookies (avoiding a second trip to the cafeteria), replacing each item where we found it. Now, I realize that this might sound like a complete waste of time to some, but I am convinced that it’s the best kind of shopping experience anyone can have. It includes the satisfaction of having choices, the anticipation of ownership, and a good strong cup of coffee to boot—all without a tinge of buyer’s remorse. Try it, you’ll see what I mean.

I was 30 years old at the time, and after years of very careful consideration I enrolled in a teacher assistant program at a large, reputable community college. The 10-month certificate program started a month earlier and ended a month later than any other programs, the hours were set from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., five days a week, and all the courses were set as well. It was a demanding and practical program that provided me with an introduction to a whole new world—a world of theory. In addition to the canonized learning theories of Piaget and Gardner, I was drawn to the work of humanistic and existentialist psychologists, such as Viktor Frankl, whose words assured me that my compulsion to connect the dots and make meaning out every event that ever happened in my life was an achievement, not a sign of neurosis; Erich Fromm, who seemed to validate

my skepticism about marriage and intrigued me with his ideas of “freedom.” As for Abraham Maslow, well, let’s just say he had me at “hierarchy of needs.”

Every day at college I felt the buzz of hundreds of little light bulbs turning on above my head as I connected each new concept to my life experience. Still, I was stunned to find that the grades from my first term were higher than I would ever have imagined. I was on the Dean’s list and for the first time I was truly savouring the flush of academic success. But my unexpected achievement gave me cause to wonder, why had it taken me so long to go to college? If only I had known earlier that I could be good at something in school...

Standing outside in the parking lot at last, scanning the acres for her little Chevette, my mom explained, “Your dad and I knew of other parents who tried to push their kids into going to college or university or some higher schooling when their kids didn’t want to go, and all the fighting it caused. We didn’t want to push you kids into doing something you didn’t want to do. We just wanted you to be happy and let you decide what you wanted to do with your own lives.” I was stunned at the simplicity of her answer. That couldn’t really be it, could it? As I mulled it over on the way to car, I wondered why, after spending a pleasantly economical day out with my mom, did I suddenly feel like I had been ripped off?

In her comparative study of working class and middle class mothers, Reay (2004a) found, that much like my own mom, who said that she and my dad just wanted me to be “happy” by allowing me to make my own decisions about my future, working class mothers in her study focused on the emotional well-being of their children in the *present* moment, granting them “freedom from academic pressure” in an effort to protect

them (and, Reay suggests, possibly themselves) from negative evaluations of middle class standards of success (p. 68). She suggests that while this early socialization process generates a particular type of habitus that may very well protect working class children from academic disappointments and hardships in the present, it puts their children at odds with the middle class culture of the school, in which a future orientation and the ability to delay gratification is important to success (Reay, 2004a).

In contrast, Weinginger and Lareau (2009) discuss the paradox of middle class parenting. As middle class parents actively guide their children through life, they emphasize values of self-direction, self-control, creativity and independence. To cultivate these traits, middle class parents offer their children structured “choices” of organized activities to take part in, which as Reay (2004b) points out, are relatively inconsequential; they may in fact be little more than the choice between taking piano lessons on a Friday evening instead of Saturday, or taking ballet instead of gymnastics, for example. Nevertheless, choices such as these are presented to stimulate creativity, curiosity, and self-control. In this way, boundaries between the adult world and the child’s world are blurred as activities are negotiated through the child’s ability to reason with the parents. It is the parents however, who retain indirect but *ultimate* control over the child’s decisions, guiding them towards the *parent’s* preferred choice (Weininger & Lareau, 2009).

Compare this parenting strategy with Walkerdine and Lucey’s (1989) reflections on working class mothers specifically, and how *they* mother their daughters:

They know that you cannot have what you want. They do not believe that they are free or have access to plenty. They are poor, often live in bad housing, they work hard, the world is hard. They must teach this to their daughters and they do so

often, by making their power visible. They stop, they say no, they regulate overtly. It is a liberal fantasy to believe that power is removed if regulation is made covert, if the girl believes herself... to be an agent of free choice, of free will. This autonomy is a sham. (Cited in Lawler, 2000, p. 80)

This lesson was brought home to me by my mother, and I internalized it completely.

There is even evidence of my learning in the narrative above, as my mom and I both realized while standing in the cashier's line, that "you cannot have what you want," even if it is on sale!

Bourdieu (1986) recognized the central role of mothers as the main transmitters of cultural capital within the family, and thus, their children's educational success, noting that they are more, or less effective, in their role depending on the amount of economic capital they have at their disposal:

It is because the cultural capital that is effectively transmitted within the family itself depends not only on the quantity of cultural capital, itself accumulated by spending time, that the domestic group possess, but also on the usable time (particularly in the form of the mother's free time) available to it (by virtue of its economic capital, which enables it to purchase the time of others) to ensure the transmission of this capital and to delay entry into the labor market through prolonged schooling. (p. 253)

As an extension of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital that includes an affective component, *emotional capital* is the "knowledge, contacts and relations as well as access to emotionally valued skills and assets, which hold within any social network characterised at least partly by affective ties" (Nowotny, 1981, as cited in Reay, 2000, p.

572). In using the concept in her study, Reay found that emotional capital was not only transmitted as positive emotions, but also as “difficult emotions” and that these varied states sometimes end with contradictory results (p. 61). Among working class mothers specifically, a tendency was observed to provide positive feedback and encouragement for their children’s academic performance even when teachers seemed to feel their children were not performing adequately. Upon reading this I recognized this tendency in my mom who, during our interview, inaccurately recalled that I had been an honours student in high school:

Ria: *And you were in a bit of trouble then in school - from being an honours student, and your marks went way, way down, and I figured this can't be good, you know? This is not going to end up the right way. But then you, yourself, you saw what was happening. And you asked us to go to the ... school in [the city]. And you changed schools then. You got on the bus every day and you went to the other school. And from there on you made new friends and you picked up again and you became an honours student again. You had good marks.*

Sandra: *Oh no! I wasn't anywhere near honours, not even close. But I graduated on time.*

Ria: *No? I thought it was. But you graduated with good marks, with decent marks, yeah. So, I'm glad you saw the light yourself, you know... when the time came you made the right choices. We were pretty proud of you, you know, about your marks in school.*

Those final grades that caused my mom to feel pride over my “accomplishment” (bless her) are as follows: English 30 – 73%; Social Studies 30 – 60%; Math 33 – 53%; Math 30 – 54%; Biology 30 – 69%; French 30 – 57%; and Religious Studies – 77%.

Passable, yes, but pride-worthy? As I mentioned earlier, these same grades elicited a very different response from my professor-partner who exclaimed: *“Those sure don’t look like the grades of someone who’s on track for university.”* I suppose that academic “success,” much like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, especially if the beholder is a working class mother.

Reay (2004a) notes that in comparison to her middle class informants, working class mothers were often hampered by poverty, insufficient educational knowledge, and lack of confidence which made it very difficult for them to provide their children with similar qualities of emotional capital as middle class mothers in her study. In our interview, my mom spoke to these last two issues:

Sandra: *Did we often ask you for help with our homework when we were little?*

Ria: *At times... not really that often. And most of the stuff, I wasn’t that smart, so dad had to help you with it, and he did. But it wasn’t very often that we had to help you kids out. You both did pretty well in school, and when you put your mind to it you did really well.*

Sandra: *How did you feel about helping us with homework, if we did ask for your help?*

Ria: *I felt, I can’t do this. I don’t know this stuff; you know?*

Sandra: *Do you think that was a problem with not attending school long enough yourself, or was it a problem because our homework in Canada is different from what you had in Holland?*

Ria: *No, [it was] because I did only the six grades, the six the lower ones and then three grades Huishoudschool.*

Sandra: *So, you didn't have the confidence to help?*

Ria: *No, no not at all.*

Social class position alone however, cannot explain everything about how involved mothers are in their children's education. In my mom's case, for example, inexperience with the Canadian education system undermined the efficacy of her cultural capital. Like the working class immigrant mothers in Reay's (1998) study, my mom brought with her a form of cultural capital that was in "the wrong currency," extinguishing any self-perceptions of her own expertise and causing her to turn over her teaching authority to my dad (p. 59). My dad however, who had more educational experience, and had confidence in his academic abilities, was not a patient teacher. Our attempts to work through my homework together always ended in shouting matches and tears; frustration occurred from both sides but the tears were all mine. The reason I didn't ask for help very often was because I knew I couldn't get it anyway. It didn't take long before I stopped asking for help with my homework altogether. In her doctoral research, Crump Turnage (2015) found a strong relationship between a "heightened sense of self-reliance" among the first generation university students in her study, and their avoidance of help-seeking behaviours (p. 69).

Consistent with Bourdieu's theoretical approach and the present study, Reay (2000) emphasizes that "History is key here... there are generational aspects of emotional capital in that reserves are built up in families over time" (p. 577). The following passage from my mom's interview illustrates this point:

Sandra: *Were your parents involved in your education?*

Ria: *Not in those days, no. Whatever the teacher said was law, you know? ... they went to[parent] teacher's meetings, but that's as far as things went, involving your kids.*

Sandra: *Did both your parents go?*

Ria: *You know [my] dad was a miner; he worked in the coalmines 36 years, and always worked the night shift so during the day he had to sleep. So when there were parent teacher interviews, mom went then.*

Sandra: *So when I was in school, how do you remember being involved?*

Ria: *Not very much Sandra, to be honest with you. We took everything for ... you know, whatever the teacher said was right. We went to the meetings, parent-teacher's meetings; but with you, really not much.*

A history of academic struggle has also been found to hamper efforts to transmit the kind of emotional capital that is beneficial to children's' success at school (Reay, 2004a). In this passage, my mom describes her fear of one particularly “mean, mean” teacher:

Ria: *[She] scared the heck out of me ...I was so scared, as a matter of fact, for one of them that I couldn't say my religion homework in front of the class but I could rattle it off at home, you know? Because that nun pulled my ear and my ear was always infected and ripped open.*

After examining the data, it became much clearer to me how my mom's negative experiences of school as a child, her inexperience with both the Canadian education system and academic English, and a familial/cultural history devoid of opportunities to engage directly with teachers - all might have worked together to inform her “linguistic sense of place” in the margins of the educational field, which manifested itself as a lack

of engagement with my teachers and a lack of entitlement to influence our academic decisions (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 82).

Skeggs (2004) suggests that what working class children may perceive as their parents' "hands off" approach toward their upbringing, may in fact become a source of confusion, creating obstacles to "self-production," which working class children must then navigate on their own (p. 91). However, she maintains that this approach is not an indication that working class parents do not care about their children's futures, just as my mom confirmed for me: *"I had high hopes for you, you know... I hoped you would take time to travel the world. And you did kind of, and yeah, and then make up your mind what you wanted to do with the rest of your life, you know? So those were my hopes for you kids."* Skeggs (2004) posits that the approach suggests a level of class consciousness and an awareness of dominant social norms that some working class parents reflexively resist, which can be recognized in my mom's claim that unlike some "other" parents, she and my dad didn't want to push us kids into doing something we didn't want to do. In fact, when I asked my mom to identify our family's social class background she did not hesitate to answer that we have always been "working class."

Ria: *Well, [your] dad always worked in a body shop and our friends, one of our friends, he had a garage in [the hamlet we lived in] ... and [another friend] was a pipe fitter, you know? And [another] worked at the Dow plant until he had his own business. So we were all working class people. Nobody did university or anything. They did high school you know, there wasn't a university person in there.*

Growing up, I can't recall that my parents ever explicitly identified with a "working class" or any other class category; we were just ordinary folk. For my parents,

the concept of normal came from socializing almost exclusively with working class people who were “just like them.” I, on the other hand, mixed with kids at school who came from a variety of social backgrounds. When I was invited to the homes of my middle class friends, dinner-table conversations often included some discussion about school and something vaguely frightening - The Future. The relative absence of dialogue about education in my home, especially what I planned to do or was expected to do education-wise after graduating from high school, in combination with the lack guidance and encouragement I received at school, was confusing for me. Left to make sense of it on my own, I concluded that I must not be a good enough student to warrant plans for a future that included PSE. Like my mom, I had internalized unspoken messages telling me, *“I am not a good learner”* and *“I am not that smart.”*

I was constantly comparing myself and our familial circumstances to the normalized, middle class standards and practices reinforced at school and in some of my friends’ homes. What I could not recognize then was the many ways my mom had been investing in me and my education all along. She may not have been able to help me with my homework, but my mom created a home environment in which I could study and do homework in peace, and simply feel relaxed. She had breakfast on the table for us every morning, she packed our lunches, did our laundry and had supper waiting in a clean, organized house at the end of each day. In addition to working several low paying and physically demanding jobs outside the home, she did all this “behind the scenes” work by herself. All this from the woman who stressed throughout our interview that she and my dad *“weren’t nearly as much involved as what we should have been”* in my education.

Educating Sandra: I

It is the summer of 2012. My parents are visiting before the fall term starts, when D. returns to teaching at the university and I will begin graduate studies in the Faculty of Education. My dad and I are standing with our morning coffees, one of us on each side of the kitchen island. Sunlight creeps through the window as our steaming cups rest on the expanse of gleaming granite countertop—a pretentious-looking slab of marbled granite that screams “overcompensation!” every time I look at it. I try to work out if my countertop could possibly cost less than any one of the cars my parents have owned.

“You know” my dad says suddenly, jarring me out of my thoughts. “You remind me a bit on Julie Walters. You know, from ‘Educating Rita’.”

My dad is referring to a movie we watched together ages ago, and its female protagonist, Rita (of course)—a 26-year-old hairdresser seeking self-improvement through an undergraduate literature course that she enrolls in at an Open University in England. A brief synopsis: For Rita, the point of university is not to get a better job or to earn more money. She wants to experience a different kind of life than the one conventional wisdom tells her she is supposed to have. In the movie Rita says, in a strong Liverpool accent: “I’ve been realizin’ for ages that I was, y’ know, slightly out of step. I’m twenty-six. I should have had a baby by now; everyone expects it... I don’t wanna’ baby yet. I wanna’ discover myself first”.

The film explores Rita’s journey of self-discovery and her transformation from a White, working class woman with minimal education to someone who is eventually able to “pass,” not only her university exams, but as a recognized member of the privileged

academic culture she aspires to join. Her transition is not easy or comfortable, however. At one point in the movie, Rita despairs that she has become a “half-caste” as she finds it increasingly difficult to return to her working class community, yet is unable to find acceptance with the academic crowd whose “dead clever” speech, culture and tastes continue to elude her for some time. The price of “passing,” which she eventually succeeds at, is steep. It costs Rita her marriage to a traditionally-minded husband, as well as her relationship to her parents. Rita’s father uses her reluctance to produce a grandchild as evidence that she thinks she is too good for her family, while her mother simply disappears from Rita’s life without protest. Even her tutor, a cynical and alcoholic professor, fears that the cultured identity Rita begins to develop is a façade that an intellectual class of people might find appealing, but one that he thinks will ultimately destroy the unique qualities she possessed when they first met.

My dad’s comment stings, but then he’s always been good at that.

Educating Sandra: II

Two years later:

“I never knew you wanted to go to university so bad,” my dad says to me the day after I interviewed him as part of my thesis project. We are standing in my kitchen again and a sense of déjà vu hits me as he stands on one side of that immovable impasse of gaudy granite again; and I, on the other. The interview I conducted with my dad lasted over 2 hours during which time I listened carefully, but with the ears of a researcher this time, taking notes and absorbing myself in stories I had already heard as his daughter, dozens of times. To my surprise, we had each discovered something new about the other.

“I never knew you didn’t expect me to graduate from high school” I retort, feeling hurt and childish in an all-too-familiar way. But then, how would I have known when I was growing up? It’s not like we ever talked or anything. Sometimes though, my dad would ask me to go to the University of Alberta with him, which was a little more than an hour’s drive from the farm where we lived. During the ride, we would listen to the radio, always the CBC, with episodes of “Quirks and Quarks,” “Ideas,” or “As It Happens” crackling through the speakers of whatever beater dad was working on at the time. Eventually he would turn the radio down and begin to talk, a bit wistfully I always thought, about what he thought student life must be like. I think my dad would have liked to have experienced the freedom he perceived students to have: freedom to pursue intellectual interests, freedom from the monotony of endless manual labour, freedom to choose how to use your time, freedom to choose...

When we arrived in Edmonton, my dad would park the car several blocks from the main campus (freedom from paid parking!) and we would walk the rest of the way. I’m sure we blended right in - two hayseeds wandering around the enormous campus, looking lost and stopping students to ask for directions and information: “Which way to David Suzuki’s talk on ecological sustainability, please?” “How do we get to the main gym where the Pandas are playing?” “What time does football practice start for the Golden Bears next Saturday?”

Why would my dad have bothered to take me to the university at all if not to impart a longing for higher education, an intellectual life and involvement in student culture, if, as he claimed, he expected me to be a high school drop out?

My interview with my dad, when I was in the data collection phase of this study, took an unexpected turn when he shared the thoughts he held in back then, “*The kid will never finish this high school, you know...*” referring to my last years at my rural school.

I was stunned by my dad’s revelation, because when I was growing up I never dreamed that dropping out of high school was an option for me. That was why it had been so important to me to change schools, get a fresh start and never return to my old rural school, at least not as a student. I had always believed that *both* of my parents expected me to graduate. I broke from the interview script, and asked my dad explicitly:

Sandra: “*Did you think I would quit high school?*”

Jacques: *Yeah, yeah, yeah...*

Sandra: *Wow, I would have never dared to quit high school!*

Jacques: *Well, I didn’t think you would ever graduate. It was bad; you fell deep... I think it was [the vice principal at the rural high school] who brought it to my attention a little bit, how bad things were, and I didn’t know what to do. But to me, you know, it was a lost, a lost deal; it was, ‘fait accompli’. Didn’t turn out to be. It turned out to be, well, it was not a, a, how should I say? But you had one hundred and some odd credits. Yeah, yeah. That you graduated on time, that was probably the biggest accomplishment - to me.*

What my dad fails to recognize is that was *him* who inspired me to go to university. Without the possibility of his unrealized dreams, I think getting a university degree would have meant very little to me when I was growing up in rural Alberta. However, my longing for higher education is about something more than just fulfilling my dad’s dreams for himself. It also needs to be understood in terms of my resistance to

the expectations of my socially constructed classed and gendered norms, and specifically to the (self-perceived?) expectations that I would live the same kind of life my mom had lived. I want to be clear that I am not judging her life as inferior to mine, although I admit that I have at times when I was younger. As I grow older I appreciate even more that unlike my dad and I, who both tend towards ambivalence, my mom has been the most unwavering in her commitment to her life's course. Because of this, our lives were much more stable than they might have been, given our circumstances.

I already knew, during early adolescence, when my girlfriends were planning their future weddings and families of their own, that I wanted none of it. Never having been sheltered from the antagonism of my parents' relationship, I knew that marriage was not bliss but a constant struggle for power and control, and the outcome of those daily battles was usually very predictable. As for a baby? Of this I was never sure. I just wanted to experience a life of my own, a life without compromise. Although it seemed a highly unlikely lifestyle for me, I always had my imagination.

Having been shut out of higher education himself, my dad saw participation in university, not as a necessity, but as a privilege. Beyond our infrequent trips to campus, I witnessed his attempts to engage in an intellectual life against the relentless physical demands of his work. My dad has always read the newspaper from cover to cover daily, and when I go home I am still occasionally required to pronounce or explain unfamiliar words. When I wanted to listen to pop music on the radio, my dad would make me listen to science, political and cultural programs on the CBC instead. Together we attended independent and foreign films at the repertory cinema, and sometimes we would go to

listen to live music at his favourite local where Saturday afternoons were, and still are, dedicated to the blues.

It is from these experiences with my dad that I acquired some degree of cultural capital, for example, being force-fed a steady diet of CBC radio proved to be beneficial to my acceptance in upper-middle class culture as it is apparently recognized as a “highbrow” cultural activity in Canada (Veenstra, 2015, p. 15). Who knew? Although my dad’s actions may have lacked the intention of the middle class parenting approach known as “concerted cultivation” – a strategy in which parents *deliberately* foster their children’s talents and interests through “organized leisure activities,” and create opportunities for them to acquire skills of reasoning and negotiation (Lareau, 2002, p.747) – it is from our spontaneous adventures together that my *educated habitus* began to develop (Nash, 2002). Nash (2002) explains that the educated habitus is grounded in a desire to “become and to be known as an educated person,” and it generates certain practices to enable this desire (p. 29); important to facilitation are personal qualities of “aspiration, academic self-concept, and perceptions of schooling” (p. 27).

No doubt the sense of constraint I felt as an adolescent girl growing up in a rural, working poor environment clashed with an emergent “educated habitus” that required certain personal qualities I did not possess, such as high aspirations, academic self-confidence, and positive perception of schooling (Nash, 2002). Despite this, I maintain that my intense longing to “become and be known as an educated person,” was enough to guarantee some degree of success once I finally arrived at university (p. 29). Considering what I know today, I cannot help but wonder what might have been if I had possessed more of the “right” attitudes *before* I entered. Would I have been a better “fit” for the

university's culture if, through out my earlier student life, I had been more assertive and better informed, if I had felt more entitled to receive assistance and attention, and had been more obviously "active" in my participation than I have been? The question is purely rhetorical; the answer, it seems to me, is only too obvious.

CHAPTER FIVE: A HARD HABITUS TO BREAK

Because it is not the working-class girls' destiny, the motivation to remain on that path must be generated from within. There are no structural reasons why they should succeed and therefore they have to rely on their own inner resources.

~ Lucey, Melody, & Walkerdine (2003, p. 297)

In this chapter I provide a summary analysis of the relationship between the data and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter Two. The framework I chose for my autoethnographic study was Bourdieu's concept of habitus along with its interrelated constructs of the *field*, *capital*, and *practice*. Using *habitus* in conjunction with autoethnography allowed me to analyze key background characteristics and transition points that not only informed my steep upward social trajectory, but more importantly, helped to shape an ambivalent disposition towards higher education and other normative (i.e., middle class) symbols of success and status I have acquired in the process.

Summary and Discussion

In this autoethnography, I took a critical, retrospective, socio-self analytic approach with the aim of gaining insight into some of my formal and informal educational experiences. To assist me with analyzing my memories, I used evidence from interviews that I conducted with my parents, as well as personal school-related documents and the literature to help me support, dismantle or trouble my old assumptions and discourses of students and/or girls from working class backgrounds. While *habitus* provided me with a conceptual "map" to show me how I arrived in my current position, the process of re-storying my experiences through autoethnography has helped me to reframe past assumptions, perceptions and beliefs, thus enabling me to adapt to a very specific field of middle class life with greater personal and social awareness. My analyses

stress the importance of familial background characteristics, particularly social class positioning, and how it intersects with geography, gender, race, and language.

In line with my goal of gaining self-knowledge I designed this study to answer the question: How did I get here? Through my inquiry, the following four sub-questions emerged:

1. What were some of the unique familial characteristics and early educational experiences from which my primary habitus emerged?
2. How has my habitus adapted as I entered various educational, occupational and social fields?
3. What is the source of my ambivalent relationship to education and upward mobility?
4. Who am I in the process of *becoming* as I extend my educational trajectory into midlife?

In the following section I use the data to address these questions and make connections between the major themes and current understandings of working class students as outlined in the literature and through dominant discourse. But let me begin by answering the Big Question, “How did I get here?” The short answer is, “I took the long way.”

Familial Characteristics and Early Educational Experiences

In Question 1, I wanted to explore the unique familial characteristics and early educational experiences from which my primary habitus was formed. English language development and the acquisition of linguistic capital were key activities for me at the time, as they influenced my sense of identity and belonging, as well as facilitating my ability to acquire other forms of capital. My limited access to “familial capital” or the

“cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” which are reinforced by extended family, was dependent on my ability to communicate with the grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins who I saw once every five or six years (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).

If there is a positive element to having limited access to familial capital, it is that it facilitated travel experience, which Cairns (2014) suggests is another valued form of cultural capital. Through trips abroad to visit family, and through my family’s “Sunday driving” habit, I developed an “expansive geography of the future.” I could imagine, and indeed, feel excited about the prospect of leaving home to pursue my goals, even as vaguely defined as they were (Cairns, 2015, p. 485). My tendency to keep daydreaming and imagining, it seems, has served me well. Imagining myself in a different place, literally and metaphorically, supported my “aspirational capital” or my “ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Additionally, my “linguistic capital” or “the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style” allowed me to excel in certain artistic endeavours such as poetry and creative writing for which I received recognition at school (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). While I was in university, I enrolled in various literature classes where style, (i.e., more creative, less “academic”) was valued. Thus, in certain disciplines, or fields, I could convert linguistic capital into economic form, using some of my writing to earn small, but much needed scholarships and financial awards to help me maintain my sense of independence.

The intersection of language and social class should not be underestimated. Bourdieu (1991) would have said that it is through familial history, early socialization, and mode of communication in the home environment, along with early experiences of education, individuals develop a “linguistic sense of place” (p. 82). This sense of place is passed through generations and may be considered a form of emotional capital in which caregivers avoid or are reluctant to engage with their child’s teachers if they themselves have had negative experiences of school. Like Bourdieu, Reay (2004a) relates the accumulation of *all* forms of capital back to a history of economic security, such that: “Economic security and high social status enhance individuals’ sense of emotional wellbeing while poverty is not an environment in which emotional capital can normally thrive” (p. 69).

Likewise, many of my struggles at school and with teachers emerged from my (real or perceived) inability to speak effectively in academic settings. Like many students from working class backgrounds, my disposition is towards silence in the classroom, which is a personal disadvantage in a field that recognizes and rewards students who stand out and speak up.

The Generative Quality of Habitus

Question 2 asks how/ if my habitus has adapted as I enter new fields. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argued that the process of education, imbedded as it is in the values, norms, practices and culture of the dominant (i.e., middle class in Canada), commits a kind of “symbolic violence” on poor and working class students. For this reason, many of these students self-select from elite or prestigious institutions such as university. Community colleges on the other hand, often feel like a better cultural fit for students

from working class backgrounds (Finnie et al., 2011). Through my entry to community college, and subsequent acceptance into a university transfer program at the same college years later, my habitus began a gradual process of transformation. Additionally, for women from non-university educated families, starting PSE at a non-university institution led to a high probability of completing university studies in the future (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008).

In his study on how successful working class students adapt to university life, Lehmann (2012) finds that getting a job on campus or becoming involved in campus organizations leads to a higher sense of identification with the institution for working class students. Thus, this is another way to facilitate a smoother transition into a culture in which they have historically been “outsiders.” Additionally, for most working class students who were uncertain about where they fit into the culture of university, working on campus was found to be a strategy that helped to establish or strengthen their commitment to their educational decisions. In my experience, obtaining work as a teaching assistant when I arrived here with my partner, was an important step to refocus my purpose for being at university, as it allowed me to re-affirm my old working class habitus while adjusting to middle class expectations. However, Lehmann (2012) points out that not all efforts towards campus involvement are planned; often luck and “chance encounters with a topic or an encouraging professor” made it possible for alienated working class students to find an “in” to their new culture (p. 539).

One way in which my habitus has been maladaptive in my new environment, especially at university, is, oddly enough, being self-reliant. I had to be self-reliant at home, and this message also *seems* consistent at school. However, seeing the contrast in

parents'/mothers' expectations and how they communicate to their children across the two different social classes gives me cause to reconsider my own confusion about the messages that teachers send to their students. Educators often send the message: "*You oversee your own learning, your own project, your own paper, etc. You should be able to decide on how you want you want to approach and present it,*" as if it really is the students' choice. Yet clearly, students are not in charge - not really. If that was true, none of us would fail. None of us would be relegated to the "classes for dummies."

Like the working class mothers in Reay's study, my mom taught me that I am not free to choose, at least not on someone else's time and dime. I have learned, the hard way, that there are very specific skills I must learn and master before I will be allowed to advance. Why then, are teachers not inclined to be more explicit about what those things are instead of pretending that students are free to choose their own path, emphasizing the need for students to take charge of their learning? Perhaps, as Reay suggests, concepts such as "freedom" and "choice" are understood in narrower terms for middle class people than they are from a working class point of view. Reay (2004a), who comes from a working class background herself, explains the paradox of middle class parenting style, which I argue, is extended into classrooms:

This lack of freedom can only be made sense of in connection with the notion of future "choices" that educational credentials allow. Here we need to evoke the ideal of the "free" bourgeois subject, a subject that must be intensely regulated as a child in order to achieve these "freedoms" as an adult—a contradiction entirely hidden in discourses of mothering and child-rearing. (p. 66)

And, I would add, hidden in the educational discourses as well.

Ambivalence

Question 3 asks, what is the source of my ambivalence towards education and upward social mobility? My memories, supported by the literature, indicate that the loss of my first language through assimilation policies that produced “first language attrition” was important to my sense of belonging, or lack thereof, within my extended family (Paradis et al., 2009). Without being able to communicate effectively with them in my home language, and not having fully mastered English, I developed a sense of being “culturally homeless” in which I felt I was not a bona fide Canadian, even though I was born in our nation’s capital, and not part of a Dutch community either (Friedman, 2015).

Wanting and trying to conform to conventional feminine ideals as a working class adolescent were met with limited success, both behaviourally and physically, and these experiences motivated my resistance to this ideal. Likewise, belonging to the dominant, i.e. White culture, but missing important aspects of that culture that are taken for granted as “normal” is also a source of ambivalence for me now, especially now that I am one of the privileged. However, dominant discourses of feminism and White privilege do not work for me.

An education system that upholds the ideology of individualism and principles of meritocracy, where uncritical acceptance of deficit discourses of working class, Indigenous, and “at risk” students is prevalent, will never adequately serve many students from these backgrounds. These discussions must include an intersectional approach that acknowledges the reality of social class inequality that is based on a history of economic instability and hardship. Having no alternatives to individualist ideologies, those who

strive for middle class markers of success are very likely to become “accomplices in their own mystification (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 142).

Who Am I Becoming?

Question 4 asks, who am I in the process of becoming through my extended educational trajectory? At the risk of appearing to support Bourdieu’s critics, who find his theories reductive, deterministic or pessimistic, my answer may in fact be influenced by my social class background. For as it often is with me, life shows me clearly what I do *not* want (or want to become) without offering me so much as a glimpse of what I should be aiming for. However, in moving towards my goal of better self-understanding, I can honestly say that I now know who/what I *am*. I am a bridge, a durable and flexible bridge, linking two different social worlds, and the kinds of people who inhabit them.

Looking backwards to where I started; I see that I did not always have access to the information and resources that might have allowed me to make educational decisions with purpose and full awareness of their consequences. Consequently, mine has been a “disordered” life course, as evidenced in part by my delayed, prolonged and circuitous trajectory to and through higher education. Disorder in this area of my life has, in turn, influenced and delayed other major life course events such as establishing myself in a career and parenting, for example (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008).

Furthermore, research shows that for women, a strong relationship exists among “early marriage, having children, and having earned no or non-university credentials” (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 139). This may help to account for why I eventually managed to complete a university degree more than 15 years after completing high school, since I divorced at a relatively young age and delayed having children until after

completing my bachelor degree at age 39. Having a baby later in life, while simultaneously starting graduate school, and having no extended family nearby to help, has often felt overwhelming for me. The temptation to quit school is relentless. Andres and Adamuti-Trache's (2008) research supports what I had already learned through my experience—that there are “strong consequences” for the choices I have made throughout the course of my disordered life, in terms of limited opportunity structures and life chances (p. 139). Choices made at key transition points to adulthood are largely determined by external structures, namely social background and gender. Their findings stress the danger of minimizing structural factors “and buying into an ideology of individualism” (Andres & Adamuti-Trache, 2008, p. 140). To this end, they argue

that the nature and timing of combinations of life-course events in which young persons engage—while accounting for gender and social class—not only determine who they are, but when examined early in their adult lives can predict with reasonable reliability who they indeed *become*. (p. 116; emphasis added)

I suspect my current “relation to power” will confound these findings, at least somewhat. To be clear, I have not come to a place where I can easily reconcile the differences I see around me now; instead, I find myself at a place of reckoning with them. Largely invisible yet profound differences I recognize between *this* fine place I inhabit now and the more-confined space of possibility that exists for working class students, ensures that there is no way for me to experience greater opportunities and improved life chances as relating to my merit or sense of individual entitlement. Instead, I consider them further evidence of covert but insidious power asymmetries that persists in

Canadian education and society. While some might think that I am being pessimistic and overly critical, I align my thinking with Lawler (2004) who writes,

Pessimism for the intellect is the motor for change: it demands that we pay attention to inequality and injustices and rests on the belief that things do not have to be the way they are, and that they will not improve without intervention.

Optimism of the will rests on the hope that things could be changed—though not without (collective) effort (p. 48).

Implications for Practice

I am reluctant to write a prescription for what educators should do or need to do to lead fully inclusive classrooms and inspire working class students to excel in education. I have two reasons for this: First, I do not believe in one-size-fits-all solutions. And two, unless the teacher is critically aware of academic discourses that undermine the quality and amount of capital working class students are likely to bring from home, their success with these students will be limited and the old cycles of social reproduction will continue, for the most part unimpeded.

Although the experiences I have depicted in this autoethnography happened to *me* and some happened as much as four decades ago, current research in the field has shown that they are not unique, nor are they relics of an unenlightened era in Canadian education. My recognition of the lived experiences and words of other working class students and scholars in education-focused literature points to the persistence of class difference and inequality. Additionally, the findings of this study highlight the importance of early experiences of education, both formal and informal, indicating that

the “problem” of working class students and higher education may start well before they enter university.

Disrupting the discourse about working class students, particularly their “lack” of educational and career aspirations, Walkerdine (2011) suggests that the issue may be a lack of support from within the education system itself, to help working class students overcome the barriers that prevent them from achieving their dreams. She argues that “such students may not lack a way of fantasising a set of desires for the future, but are not well supported in education to mobilise these into an imagination which can be acted upon” (p. 256). Educators could capitalize on the hopes and dreams of working class students by encouraging them and providing with practical advice that they may not be able to receive at home. Jones and Vagle (2008) meanwhile, suggest that even young children can be taught to locate their individual circumstances within a larger socio-cultural framework. Doing so could potentially prevent students from lower social backgrounds from feeling alone in their struggles and internalizing the feeling that there must be something wrong with *them*.

Educators, especially those at the primary and secondary levels, could do much to help working class students, as well as students from other marginalized groups, to develop positive school-related aspirations and self-perceptions by becoming more aware of alternative forms of capital that these students bring from their home environments. I am not suggesting that these forms of capital should replace the cultural capital valued by the school. Rather, they should serve as the foundation of students’ self-confidence from which educators can then help non-mainstream students begin to build and accumulate other, legitimized forms of capital. To this end, educators who have been provided with

the time and resources required for a critical re-examination of the trajectory that led *them* to work in the field as teachers, may be in a better position to appreciate alternative forms of capital, such as those described earlier by Yosso (2005).

At the university level, intersectionality is commonly evoked in academic discussion to acknowledge race and gender, but it is rarely used to address the issue of class. As a student, I have often been bewildered and let down by the absence of engagement with issues of social class, even though “class” often appears as a topic for discussion on syllabi. Heller (2010) points out that there is widespread agreement “that the use of intersectionality is essential for understanding how white privilege is experienced among whites of different classes and gender” (p. 113), yet very few theorists utilize it to explicitly or implicitly incorporate the intersection of class. As Heller notes,

To speak only of the “average” white or of general trends will appear phenomenologically incorrect to whites on the margins who use their own experience to judge the validity of scholarly claims of racial privilege, because not all manifestations of racial privilege are universally accessible to whites. ... [Furthermore] if white privilege is not historically located then it may appear that racial oppression is inevitable. (p. 114)

Final Thoughts

My life is not a thesis. The gap between what I have learned through this experience and what I can articulate in an academic paper is too great, the cleft perhaps, is still too wide. My experiences do not map neatly onto key findings outlined in a literature review. I cannot make a definitive statement about the “problem” of my social

position because, through its intersections with my race, gender, and other unique background characteristics, it cannot be made static or isolated. Nor does my life lend itself to a clearly defined “purpose.” To be sure, I have often questioned its purpose myself. Lastly (and fortunately for me), I have not yet reached its “conclusion.”

My life is a story—a fragmented, messy, and rambling story that resists getting dressed up. Had I known this from the start, I might not have conducted an autoethnography, so this time I am grateful not to have known everything I should have before diving in head first. As I read over the finished product of my efforts, I find it sorely wanting. But the *process* of conducting graduate level research, with the time and resources it demands for reading, reflection, theoretical understanding and critical analysis, has been more than worthwhile. I participated in higher education for the sake of experience and with the purpose of gaining an “other” form of knowledge. As my dad would say, no one can take that away from me. Although I can no longer claim a working class status, by the time I had entered university it was already too late for me to become fully indoctrinated into an academic, middle class culture. I see now that the seeds of my ambivalence about education and upward mobility were sown long before I arrived here. I have no regrets about this, in fact, I would not want it any other way. My view from the periphery is priceless.

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